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Iraq: Executions at their highest in post-Saddam Iraq

A sharp increase in the use of the death penalty in Iraq has brought the number of known executions to the highest in the decade since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, with at least seven prisoners sent to the gallows yesterday, sparking fears that many more death row prisoners are at risk, Amnesty International said.

"Iraq's increased use of the death penalty, often after unfair trials in which many prisoners report having been tortured into confessing crimes, is a futile attempt to resolve the country's serious security and justice problems," said Phillip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"In order to actually protect civilians better from violent attacks by armed groups, authorities in Iraq must effectively investigate abuses and bring those responsible to justice in a system that is fair, without recourse to the death penalty."

At least 132 people have been executed in Iraq so far this year – the highest number since the country reinstated capital punishment in 2004. However, the true number could be higher and the Iraqi authorities have yet to publish full figures.

Previously, only in 2009 (at least 120 executions) and in 2012 (at least 129) were the figures of known executions comparable to this year's total, but each time for the whole calendar year.

"The stark rise in executions witnessed in 2012 has only gotten worse in 2013. The government apparently refuses to accept that the death penalty does nothing in deterring attacks by armed groups against civilians in Iraq or other serious human rights abuses," said said Phillip Luther.

Death sentences are often handed down after deeply unfair trials, where prisoners do not have access to proper legal representation and "confessions" to crimes are frequently extracted through torture or other ill-treatment.

In recent statements announcing the execution of 23 prisoners in September and 42 in October, the Iraqi Ministry of Justice misleadingly states that all death sentences are reviewed and confirmed by the Court of Cassation before executions take place.

But the Court of Cassation regularly fails to address the admission by trial courts of contested evidence, including withdrawn "confessions" and allegations of coercion and torture, when approving death sentences at the review stage. The generally paper-based procedure fails to give defendants a genuine review.

"For justice to prevail in Iraq the authorities have a long way to go to address the flaws in their criminal justice system, investigate claims of torture and other ill-treatment in custody, and, where applicable, grant re-trials in full compliance with international fair trial standards," said Phillip Luther.

"The authorities in Iraq must stop their reliance on the death penalty, by immediately declaring a moratorium on executions as a first step and commuting all death sentences to prison terms."

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty – the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment – in all cases without exception, as a violation of the right to life.