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USA/Philippines: World leader in lethal injections sets deadly example

The scheduled killings of eight people in the USA and Philippines during the next seven days are linked by a deadly connection extending beyond the calculated cruelty of executions and their affront to human dignity, Amnesty International said today.

“The fingerprints of the USA -- world leader in killing prisoners by lethal injection -- mark the executions carried out in the Philippines,” Amnesty International said. “We are witnessing the deadly fruits of an international ‘working relationship’ between an old hand and a newcomer.”

As part of his government’s plans to resume executions after a 20-year gap, the then Philippines prisons chief, Vicente Vinarao, reportedly visited several US states in 1997 to learn from their experience of lethal injection. After witnessing an execution in Texas he was later quoted as saying that his own executioners would “probably be sent to the United States for training”.

There have also been unconfirmed reports indicating that the Philippines authorities may have imported lethal injection equipment from the USA. But even if they did not import the technology, they have certainly imported the technique.

Four men face death by lethal injection in the Philippines between 16 and 18 August. The USA has executed four prisoners in the past week. By 18 August it plans to have killed four more by lethal injection in Texas and Virginia.

“The USA’s increasing resort to judicial killings -- against the global trend and often in violation of international standards -- is setting an appalling example for the rest of the world,” Amnesty International continued

“To in any way assist another country in learning how ‘best’ to execute prisoners renders null and void repeated US claims to be the world’s leading force for human rights.”

The mode of execution in the Philippines was changed by Congress from electrocution to lethal injection in February 1996. Five men have been put to death since the country resumed executions in February 1999 with the killing of Leo Echegaray. One of them, Eduardo Agbayani, was executed in June for the rape of his daughter, who had pleaded for his life to be spared. President Estrada decided to grant him clemency, but the phone call to the death chamber came minutes too late.

“We deeply regret that President Estrada has not used the cruel debacle of that execution to lead the Philippines away from state killing,” Amnesty International said. “Instead, he is set to almost double his country’s judicial death toll within the next few days.”

At least one person is sentenced to death every day in the Philippines, where the death penalty is mandatory for a high number of offences. This happens despite persistent reports that suspects in criminal cases have been tortured in custody before their trial to extract confessions.

Worldwide appeals for clemency continue to flood into US and Philippines officials. While there have been links between executions in the Philippines and US at an official level, a connection also runs through the abolitionist community.

In 1998, members of the Journey of Hope, a US organization of murder victims' and death row inmates' relatives, travelled to the Philippines to campaign against the resumption of executions. Among them was Lois Robison, whose son Larry is scheduled to die in Texas on 17 August.

"As with any execution, the killing of Larry Robison will only create more victims," Amnesty International said. "Rather than offering any constructive solutions to violent crime, his killing will be a final brutal act in a failure of crime prevention."

Larry Robison was diagnosed as a chronic paranoid schizophrenic three years before his crime, but the Texas mental health care services repeatedly said that they did not have the resources to treat him unless he turned violent.

"Texas has had no such hesitation in devoting massive resources to its own brutal response to Larry Robison's crime," Amnesty International continued. "By the time he is led to the execution chamber, it will have cost the state more than two million dollars to get him there."

Larry Robison is set to become the 98th person executed in Texas under George W. Bush's governorship. The Governor's 99th execution is scheduled for the following day. Governor Bush is currently campaigning to become the USA's next President under the flag of "compassionate conservatism".

"The imminent execution of Larry Robison presents Governor Bush with an opportunity to begin to demonstrate that compassion and respect for international standards can yet become a characteristic of his leadership," Amnesty International said.

Use of the death penalty in the USA and the Philippines has had other tragic connections. Alvaro Calambro is one of 63 people executed by the US so far during 1999. A Philippines national, he was put to death despite his borderline mental retardation and the violation of his rights to consular access, in addition to protests from the Philippines government.

"The Philippines' use of the death penalty will only undermine its efforts to obtain clemency for Filipinos sentenced to death abroad," Amnesty International said.

"The framework of international standards built up over the past 50 years is a product of positive cooperation between governments. We are urging Philippines and US authorities to work together to honour such agreements, and to join the growing list of countries -- now more than half of all members of the United Nations -- which have turned their backs on the death penalty."

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