

News Service 071/00

AI Index: ACT 50/09/00

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HRS GMT 18 APRIL 2000

Amnesty International releases statistics on worldwide executions for 1999, calls for moratorium

During 1999 over 1,813 people were executed in 31 countries, Amnesty International said today.

Releasing its statistics for the number of worldwide executions carried out during 1999, Amnesty International called on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to take a strong stand against the death penalty at its annual session, currently in progress in Geneva, and to establish a moratorium on executions.

Amnesty International stressed that the figures released today only include cases known to the organization. "It is impossible to give a complete total because many countries deliberately keep the true numbers of those executed secret in order to avoid international condemnation and embarrassment," the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International also recorded over 3,857 people who were sentenced to death in 63 countries during 1999.

"Although the number of recorded worldwide executions is less than the 2,258 executions recorded last year, certain countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the USA actually increased the numbers of executions in 1999," the organization added.

In Saudi Arabia the rate of executions has risen significantly. In 1998, 29 people were officially reported to have been executed. Last year, 103 executions were officially announced although the real figure is probably much higher. A significant proportion of those executed were denied any formal legal representation.

China continues to execute more people than the rest of the world put together. In 1999, limited records available at the end of the year indicated that the authorities carried out at least 1,077 executions -- although the true figures are believed to be far higher. Many prisoners in China are sentenced to death after trials that are often grossly unfair.

As many as 100 people were executed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo after being sentenced to death by a military court.

The USA executed 98 prisoners last year, 30 more than were executed in 1998. Among these was one person convicted of a crime committed when he was under the age of 18. In the first three months of 2000 alone more such people have been executed in the USA in defiance of international law. According to Amnesty International's knowledge the only other country believed to have executed a person during 1999 for a crime committed before he was 18 was Iran, whose 165 executions recorded during the year far exceeded the 66 executions recorded in 1998.

The figures for China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the USA accounted for 85 per cent of all known executions in 1999, Amnesty International said. The organization also received reports of hundreds of executions in Iraq but was unable to determine whether most of them were judicial or extrajudicial, given the secrecy surrounding them.

Countries such as Cuba, Oman and the United Arab Emirates expanded the scope of the death penalty to non-lethal crimes such as drug-trafficking, armed robbery and the import of banned materials, although the Commission on Human Rights in 1999 called on states to reduce the number of capital crimes.

Regrettably, several countries reversed their *de facto* moratoria on executions during 1999. Nine men were hanged in Trinidad and Tobago in June, five years after the last execution had taken place, and in Uganda, 28 people were executed on 28 April, the first executions to occur in the country since 1996.

"Yet there has also been progress towards abolition," the organization said. "At the turn of the last century only three countries in the world had permanently abolished the death penalty. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, 108 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice, reflecting the worldwide trend towards abolition."

During 1999, East Timor, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and the British dependent territory of Bermuda abolished the death penalty for all crimes, while Latvia abolished it for peacetime offences. In the Russian Federation, President Yeltsin commuted more than 700 death sentences in June 1999. Last month the Philippines announced a moratorium on executions until the end of the year.

Additionally, since the beginning of 1999 Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Slovakia, Turkmenistan and the UK have ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) -- a treaty providing for the total abolition of the death penalty -- bringing the number of state parties to the Second Optional Protocol to 42.

"The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and a violation of the right to life," Amnesty International said. "Protecting the right to life is an international responsibility."

"The Commission on Human Rights, currently sitting in Geneva, will hopefully soon pass another strong resolution reiterating its call for an immediate worldwide moratorium on executions. The UN should take the lead and take firm and positive measures to protect those facing the death penalty," Amnesty International concluded.

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