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£PAKISTAN: @CALL FOR STAY OF EXECUTION OF 20 CONVICTED AFTER UNFAIR TRIALS

Amnesty International today urgently appealed to Pakistan's authorities to stay the imminent public execution of at least 20 people convicted by special "speedy trial" courts introduced in August.

It said none of the prisoners had received fair trials and it feared that their deaths would herald a wave of executions throughout the country after a three-year lull in the use of the death penalty in Pakistan.

The organization said that some reports put the number of imminent executions as high as 40, and that the special courts were continuing to pass death sentences.

"These cases raise a fearful spectre for Pakistan as the authorities turn back the clock on human rights," Amnesty International said.

It said it was also concerned that the authorities were reviving old cases of prisoners whose death sentences had been commuted after 1988.

"At least 100 such prisoners have been moved back on to death row. We don't know what will happen to them but we fear they and up to another 2,000 prisoners are at risk of having their commutations reversed."

Under legislation introduced in Pakistan this year the Federal Government is empowered to set up any number of special courts to ensure speedy trials of people accused of offences considered "gruesome, brutal and sensational... or shocking to public morality."

Such special courts also have exclusive jurisdiction in certain political cases, including those in which violence is not involved, such as "condemnation of the creation of the state and advocacy of abolition of its sovereignty."

Amnesty International said the arbitrary time limits on trial procedures set by the "speedy trial" system and its denial of any appeal to the highest courts in the land violated defendants' basic rights to fair trial.

Trials have to be decided by courts within 30 days and any adjournments may not last longer than two days. In at least one case a special court imposed the death sentence after proceedings had lasted only three days.

"That simply is not enough in cases involving life and death," Amnesty International said. "International law says that defendants must be allowed adequate time to present a full defence."

The "speedy trial" special courts were introduced under the government of General Zia-ul-Haq but were abandoned after former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto took office in December 1988.

At that stage over 2,000 prisoners were on death row, some convicted by the speedy system, and others after unfair trials by military courts. Their sentences were commuted in December 1988.

The present government, which took office in 1990, has publicly criticized the commutations.

"We fear there is a real danger that those prisoners whose sentences were commuted will have to face trial again before the special courts."

Pakistan law provides for execution by hanging or, in cases of adultery, by stoning to death. Under the speedy trials system the Federal Government may specify how and where an execution is to be carried out.

The government has repeatedly said it favours public executions as a

deterrent against crime.

Amnesty International, which opposes the death penalty in all circumstances as a violation of the right to life and the ultimate cruel and inhuman punishment, said no evidence had ever been produced to show that the death penalty was a unique deterrent.

The organization has appealed to President Ghulam Ishaq Khan not to proceed with the impending executions and to order a review of all cases tried by the special courts. It has also called for the abolition of the speedy trial system.

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