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SRI LANKA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
APPEALS AGAINST RESUMPTION OF
EXECUTIONS

Nearly 20 years after the last execution took place in Sri Lanka, the government announced this week that it will start carrying out death sentences.

"The decision to restore this most cruel and inhuman form of punishment represents a retrogressive step for human rights in Sri Lanka," Amnesty International said today.

The organization said it was particularly disheartened by the news of a possible resumption of executions as it had been encouraged by proposed amendments to the fundamental rights chapter of the constitution put forward by the government incorporating a provision for the protection of the right to life.

Amnesty International is appealing to the Government of Sri Lanka to remove the death penalty from the statute books in affirmation of its stated commitment to human rights, particularly to the right to life.

"By removing the death penalty, Sri Lanka would join nearly half of all countries in the world who have abolished the death penalty in law or practice," Amnesty International said.

The decision to reintroduce executions was taken after a private member's motion calling for the return of the gallows was passed in parliament on 9 June. The main argument put forward in the motion apparently was that this move would deter people from resorting to violent crimes such as rape and gang crime as well as drug-related offences; these incidents have reportedly increased in Sri Lanka over the last few years. The last execution took place on 23 June 1976.

In urgent appeals to the President and the Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, Amnesty International said that study after study in diverse countries -- including a study by a Commission on Capital Punishment instituted in Sri Lanka in the late 1950s -- have failed to find convincing evidence that the death penalty has any unique capacity to deter others from committing particular crimes.

Indeed, very recently, on 6 June 1995, the Supreme Court of South Africa unanimously held that the death penalty is against the country's constitution. The president of the court said: "It has not been shown that the death sentence would be materially more effective to

deter or prevent murder than the alternative sentence of life imprisonment would be".

The same lack of evidence applies to the use of the death penalty to deter drug trafficking. Hundreds of prisoners convicted of drug offences have been executed; the rationale being that using the death penalty will deter drug-traffickers more effectively than other punishments. But despite all these executions there is no clear evidence of a decline in drug-trafficking which could clearly be attributed to the threat or use of that penalty.

As President Nelson Mandela commented on the South African Supreme Court ruling: it is in line with "contemporary civilised norms". **ENDS**