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UKRAINE: SECRET MASS EXECUTIONS IN UKRAINE CALLED "BARBARIC"

Following the shocking information revealed last Friday by the Council of Europe that Ukraine has secretly executed more than one hundred prisoners this year, Amnesty International is urgently calling on the Ukrainian authorities to immediately stop any further executions.

The executions were described by a special representative of the 40-nation Council of Europe as barbaric and in defiance of the commitment Ukraine made to institute an immediate moratorium on executions on joining the Council of Europe in November 1995.

"This is a shameful number of executions -- only China is known to have executed more prisoners this year," Amnesty International said today.

The executions were disclosed at a news conference on Friday 29 November in Kiev, Ukraine, at the end of an international seminar on the death penalty organized by the Council of Europe. In a dramatic statement, Zsolt Nemeth, Council of Europe rapporteur on the honouring of obligations and commitments by Ukraine, told journalists he had just received the "shocking" information. He said that the executions could only be characterized as "barbarism" and called into question the credibility of Ukraine.

"Ukraine must now institute an immediate moratorium on executions and provide a timetable for abolishing the death penalty," Zsolt Nemeth said. "We cannot be satisfied with promises. We need to see concrete plans."

Zsolt Nemeth called on the Ukrainian authorities to disclose the names of those executed -- under a 1993 law, information on the death penalty is a state secret. He said that executed prisoners were buried in unmarked graves and their families were not notified of the executions.

After this disclosure Ukrainian Minister of Justice Serhiy Holovaty confirmed that 89 prisoners were executed in the first six months of 1996. He told the news conference he believed Ukraine must honour its commitment to stop executions.

Eric Prokosch, an Amnesty International representative, told the news conference that Ukraine must take five steps to implement its commitment to the Council of Europe.

First, there must be a political decision not to sign any more execution orders. Second, this decision must be formalized by the central government issuing an order to all prison governors that no further executions are to be carried out. These two steps should be taken immediately.

Third, the government must begin to prepare public opinion to accept the abolition of the death penalty. Fourth, it must sign Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights, providing for the abolition of the death penalty in peacetime. Lastly, the government and parliament must prepare and enact legislation to remove the death penalty from the country's penal code.

The number of executions disclosed by the Council of Europe rapporteur confirms reports received by Amnesty International that approximately 100 people were executed this year. Amnesty International has been able to confirm five of those executions, one in March, one in June, two in August and one in October. The organization has appealed to President Leonid Kuchma to grant clemency to all death penalty prisoners, but President Kuchma never replied to the appeals.

Birger Hagard, Chairperson of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said at the news conference it was hard to understand why this number of executions had happened. *"Ukraine hurts itself by having these executions,"* he said. *"Ukraine hurts its reputation as a free country with relations to the rest of Europe."*

According to Amnesty International, the relatives of Sergey Tekuchev, executed in October, have claimed that he was innocent and that his confession was obtained under duress. There are claims that the emergency services were called six times in October 1994 to treat him for injuries resulting from beatings in custody and that the prison authorities refused to pass to him medication from his relatives.

BACKGROUND

Ukraine committed itself on 26 September 1995 to sign Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights within one year of accession to the Council of Europe *"and to put into place, with immediate effect from the day of accession, a moratorium on executions"*. It acceded to the Council of Europe on 9 November 1995.

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organization comprising 40 western and eastern European states. Its Parliamentary Assembly adopted a policy in June 1996 that any new state joining the Council must stop executions immediately and indicate its willingness to abolish the death penalty.

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