

AI Index: PRE 01/330/2013
03 July 2013

Pakistan: Thousands of prisoners at risk if government resumes executions

The new Pakistani government must not resume executions and instead impose an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty as a first step towards abolition, Amnesty International said.

Media reports in Pakistan over the past few days have suggested that the new government, led by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, may be moving rapidly to resume state killings in response to the prevailing law and order situation in the country.

"Any government green light to resume executions in Pakistan would be a shocking and retrograde step, putting thousands of people's lives at risk," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

Pakistan has more than 8,000 prisoners on death row, most of whom have exhausted the appeals process, and could now be facing execution.

"The sheer number of people at risk makes the new government policy of turning back to the death penalty even more horrendous," said Truscott.

A presidential order imposing a moratorium on the death penalty, issued in 2008, expired on 30 June. According to media reports the government has no intention of extending the order. Instead, it is implementing a new policy to execute all death row prisoners except those whose mercy petitions have "reasons to be considered".

"As long as the death penalty is in place, the risk of executing innocent people can never be eliminated. The systemic fair trials violations in Pakistan not only exacerbate this risk, but also puts Pakistan in breach of its international obligations," said Truscott.

"We urge the government to immediately extend the moratorium order, with a view to eventually abolishing the use of capital punishment altogether."

While the Pakistani government is reportedly touting the resumption in executions as a way to tackle the country's law and order problems, there is no compelling evidence that the death penalty acts as a particular deterrent in capital crimes compared to other forms of punishment.

The most comprehensive study carried out by the UN in 1988 and most recently updated in 2008 concluded that there is no proof that executions are a greater deterrent to crime than life imprisonment.

"At a time when Pakistan's justice system is struggling to cope with the law and order situation, it can be all too easy for governments to see the death penalty as a quick fix solution. But the death penalty is not the answer to Pakistan's justice problems," said Truscott.

“Resuming executions would do nothing to tackle crime or militancy, but instead just perpetuate a cycle of violence.”

With the exception of the execution of a soldier in November 2012, death sentences have not been carried out in the country since 2008.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime; guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual; or the method used by the state to carry out the execution.