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Belarus: Rare clemencies overshadowed by latest suspected execution

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the news that Viktor Paulau, who was sentenced to death in July 2019, has most probably been executed. This worrying news follows the presidential decision to grant clemency to two young brothers, Stanislau and Illia Kostseu, who had been on death row in Belarus since January 2020 for the murder of their former teacher.

On 30 April 2021, the Kostseu brothers' mother attempted to deliver a parcel for Stanislau and Illia to the prison in Minsk where they were held on death row. When she tried to hand over the parcel, a prison official told her that her sons were no longer there. In Belarus, such news is often the first indication that a person held on death row has been executed, due to the secrecy that still surrounds the process and notification of executions. However, in this case their mother was then told that there had been a presidential decree granting them clemency. Their mother was completely shocked and phoned her daughter, asking the prison official to repeat the news so that their sister could hear. The prison official said "Ladies, we do not make jokes about such things."

It is only the second known time since Alyaksandr Lukashenka was first elected as president in 1994 that clemency has been granted to a person facing execution. However, hopes that the move might be indicative of more positive changes as regards the death penalty in Belarus, which remains the last country in Europe and Central Asia to still carry out executions, were swiftly dashed.

Just days later, on 4 May, the Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Viktor Skrundzik who, along with three other men, was found guilty by the Minsk Regional Court in March 2020 of killing two elderly men and attempting to kill an 85-year old woman. His co-defendants were all sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Unusually, in June 2020 the Supreme Court overturned Viktor Skrundzik's death sentence and ordered a retrial. In January this year, he was sentenced to death for a second time and the sentence was subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court. If Viktor Skrundzik's appeal for clemency is refused, he will be executed. He was one of three men known to still be on death row, along with Viktor Serhil and Viktor Paulau.

Viktor Paulau's sister was repeatedly denied permission to see him in recent weeks. On 10 June his lawyer tried to visit him at the pre-trial detention centre, only to be informed by the centre's officials that his client was not in the detention centre any more. This is usually the first sign for families that their relative has been executed: relatives are never informed of the date of the execution which is only confirmed to them weeks later. The secrecy surrounding the death penalty in Belarus inflicts unnecessary suffering on the relatives of those on death row. The UN Human Rights Committee has found that this is equal to torture and other ill-treatment.

Viktor Serhil remains at risk of imminent execution.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally and urges the Belarusian authorities to disclose immediately the fate of Viktor Paulau, and to grant clemency to all persons held on death row in the country. Belarus should introduce an immediate moratorium on all executions as a first step towards full abolition of the death penalty in law.