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UN overwhelmingly backs call to suspend executions

Today the UN General Assembly endorsed the call for a worldwide moratorium on executions by an overwhelming majority. The resolution enjoyed strong cross-regional support.

"This landmark resolution is a major step towards ending this cruel and inhuman punishment and is an important contribution to protecting human rights,' said Yvonne Terlingen, Amnesty International's Head of Office at the UN. "The death penalty is inhuman, inherently arbitrary and innocent people are invariably executed."

This important resolution is further evidence of the world-wide trend towards abolition. It clearly demonstrates how world opinion has moved further against the death penalty since the issue was last discussed by the General Assembly In 1999.

The resolution was adopted by 104 countries voting in favour, 54 against and 29 abstentions. This is an increase of five votes in favour since the Third Committee of the General Assembly adopted the resolution in mid November.

"Amnesty International pays tribute to the leadership shown by 104 countries that supported the moratorium with a view to abolishing the death penalty," said Terlingen.

Given the size of the majority vote, the resolution carries considerable moral and political weight.

Amnesty International calls on all states that still retain the death penalty to institute an immediate moratorium on executions. "A moratorium should allow all sectors of civil society to participate in an informed debate and prompt governments to review laws on capital punishment in accordance with the resolution's provisions," said Terlingen.

Background information

Death penalty

The General Assembly, sitting in plenary, endorsed today the text of a resolution that had adopted on 15 November 2007 by its Third Committee with 99 votes for, 52 against and 33 abstentions. This cross-regional initiative for a global moratorium on executions was led by ten countries: Albania, Angola, Brazil, Croatia, Gabon, Mexico, New Zealand, the Philippines, Portugal (for the EU) and Timor Leste. The General Assembly saw two unsuccessful attempts to address the issue of the death penalty, in 1994 and 1999, but since then the number of countries that have abolished the death penalty in law or practice has risen.

In 1971 and 1977 the General Assembly adopted two resolutions on capital punishment, saying that it was "desirable" for states to abolish the death penalty. Today's resolution goes further, calling on states that still maintain the death penalty "to establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty". It urges these states "to respect international standards that provide safeguards guaranteeing the protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty" and "progressively restrict the use of the death penalty and reduce the number of offences for which it may be imposed." The resolution also requests the UN Secretary-General to report to the UN General Assembly in 2008 on the implementation of the resolution.

So far, 133 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Only 25 countries actually carried out executions in 2006. In 2006, 91 percent of all known executions took place in China, Iran,

Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan and the USA. Amnesty International recently uncovered evidence that at least seven prisoners were executed in Nigeria, despite repeated assurances from the government that no executions had taken place in recent years. Amnesty International's statistics also show an overall decline in the number of executions in 2006 — a recorded 1,591 executions, compared to 2,148 in 2005. Countries that abolished the death penalty in recent years are Rwanda in 2007, The Philippines in 2006 and this week the US state of New Jersey abolished the death penalty. In 1977 just 16 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes, now, the figure has risen to 90. By November 2007, 133 countries had abolished the death penalty in law or in practice.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases, without exception. The death penalty is the ultimate denial of human rights — the premeditated and cold-blooded killing of a human being by the state in the name of justice. It violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

For further information contact

Yvonne Terlingen

Head of Amnesty International Office at the United Nations

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