

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 37/001/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 182
5 July 2005

Sri Lanka: Amnesty International urges President not to resume executions

Amnesty International is gravely concerned at reports that the Justice Ministry and the Attorney General have recommended that the death sentences imposed on the killers of Rita John be carried out.

Amnesty International recognises that the rape and murder of Rita John was a horrific crime and that those responsible must be punished. However, no matter how terrible the crime, as a violation of the right life and the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, the death penalty can never be justified.

Amnesty International therefore urges the President to reject the recommendations of the Justice Ministry and the Attorney General and to stand firm in maintaining the moratorium on executions.

The implementation of the death penalty in this case would be a retrograde step, which would end a 29 year moratorium on executions and reverse the significant progress Sri Lanka has made in protecting and promoting human rights. Moreover, in past decades Sri Lanka has been one of the Asian countries that has set an example in the region by rejecting the death penalty and the reactivation proposed by the Justice Ministry and Attorney General would break with that tradition, as well as with the international trend towards abolition of the death penalty.

Amnesty International recognises that Sri Lanka has for some time been facing an increase in serious crime and that the state must respond to this. However, the death penalty violates human rights and there is no proof that it is a more effective deterrent to crime than imprisonment.

Background

The last execution in Sri Lanka was carried out in June 1976. Since then consecutive Presidents have automatically commuted all death sentences.

On 20 November 2004 the Office of the President announced that the death penalty would be reactivated, stating that, "the death penalty will be effective from today for rape, murder and narcotics dealings". In response to this disturbing announcement, Amnesty International wrote to the President urging her not to reactivate the death penalty and proposing the appointment of a commission to study the apparent rise in criminality in Sri Lanka and make recommendations for effective measures which could be taken without resort to the death penalty. Similar proposals were made to the Sri Lankan government by Amnesty International in March 2003 and March 1999. In June 2001, the then Minister of Justice had indicated his interest in commissioning such a study.

During a meeting with an Amnesty International delegation visiting Sri Lanka in June 2002, the President promised to continue the practice of automatically commuting all death sentences that came

before her.