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Philippines: Execution of Leo Echegaray is serious blow for human rights

On the morning of 5 February 1999, as Leo Echegaray was strapped to a gurney and executed by lethal injection, the struggle for human rights in the Philippines suffered a serious blow, Amnesty International said today.

"Today's execution -- the first to take place in the Philippines for 23 years -- marks a huge step in the wrong direction for human rights in the Philippines," Amnesty International said.

"Killing people provides no solutions to growing crime rates. Instead it entrenches a culture of violence more deeply in society."

"Leo Echegaray's execution could set in motion a conveyor belt of judicial killings in the Philippines, each of which will further reduce respect for the most basic of all human rights -- the right to life."

There are currently 915 people on death row in the Philippines. Twenty-three of them have had their sentences confirmed by the Supreme Court. Eight are due to be executed during 1999.

"In carrying out this execution, the Philippines is not only out of step with the current worldwide moves towards abolishing the death penalty. It is also at odds with its own recent history during which efforts have been made to restore respect for human rights."

Amnesty International believes that the constitutional abolition of the death penalty in 1987 was an inherent part of the break with its violent past, to put a final end to the illegal killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and "disappearances" which marred the rule of the Marcos regime.

Until now, the Philippines has been a country which in many ways has been at the forefront of human rights in Asia. If any good can come of this execution, it will be a sobering of public opinion in the Philippines and a return by Filipinos to upholding the right to life.

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