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DEATH PENALTY: UN CALL FOR MORATORIUM ON EXECUTIONS GAINS RECORD-HIGH SUPPORT AT COMMITTEE VOTE

Today the international community offered unprecedented support to a UN call to halt executions when the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly considered a draft resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. A total of 123 UN member states – the highest number on record to date – voted in favour of the proposal, mirroring recent increases in the number of countries that have abolished the death penalty in law or practice globally.

A minority of countries, 36, voted against the proposal and 30 abstained at the vote. For the first time, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominica and Malaysia positively changed their vote to support the resolution, while Antigua and Barbuda moved from opposition to abstention. Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Mauritius, Rwanda and Seychelles once again voted in favour of the call for a moratorium on executions, after they did not do so in 2016. Only two countries negatively changed their votes compared to December 2016, with Bahrain switching from abstention to voting against and Suriname from voting in favour to abstention.

The increase in the support for the draft resolution offers yet another indication that the world's direction on the death penalty continues to be in favour of its eventual abolition. Since the adoption of the last UNGA moratorium resolution in 2016, indefinite stays of execution were put in place in Gambia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea and several other countries have taken important steps to move in this direction. In 2017 Guinea and Mongolia each abolished the death penalty for all crimes and Guatemala became abolitionist for ordinary crimes only. Burkina Faso was the last country to have removed the death penalty from its Criminal Code last June, while Gambia ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty, last September. The weight of the death penalty is carried by an isolated group of countries. In 2017 executions were reported in 22 UN member states, 11% of the total. Of these executing countries, only 11, or 6%, were "persistent" executioners, meaning that they carried out executions every year in the previous five years.

The continued adoption by the UN main deliberative body of resolutions encouraging states to end executions has strengthened debates on the issue of the death penalty and contributed to significant advances at national level towards its abolition. Amnesty International urges all UN member states to support this draft resolution when it comes for final adoption in December. Those countries still retaining the death penalty should immediately establish a moratorium on executions as a first step towards full abolition.

Background

Since 2007 the UN General Assembly has adopted, with increased cross-regional support, six resolutions calling on all states that still retain the death penalty to establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing this punishment. The overall number of votes in favour of these resolutions grew from 104 in 2007 to 117 in 2016. Today's Third Committee vote saw this figure rise to 123. Following today's vote, the plenary session of the UN General Assembly is expected to endorse this seventh draft moratorium resolution in mid-December.

When the UN was founded in 1945 only eight countries had abolished the death penalty. Today, 103 out of 193 UN member states have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, and 139 have done so in law or practice. In 2017, 170 (88%) UN member states were executions-free.

Although not legally binding, UN General Assembly resolutions carry considerable moral and political weight. The adoption of these ground-breaking resolutions has set the death penalty clearly within the human rights priorities of the international community and has generated a new momentum among civil society and governments in all regions towards ending executions and repealing this punishment from national legislation.

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.