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Iraq: 128 face execution in batches of 20

Amnesty International today called for the immediate intervention of Iraq's Justice Minister to stop the execution of 128 prisoners on death row, amid reports that the authorities are planning to start executing them in batches of up to 20 starting next week.

"The Iraqi government said in 2004 that reinstating capital punishment would curb widespread violence in the country. The reality, however, is that violence has continued at extremely high levels and the death penalty has yet again been shown to be no deterrent," said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. "In fact, many attacks are perpetrated by suicide bombers who, clearly, are unlikely to be deterred by the threat of execution."

On 9 March 2009, the Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council informed Amnesty International that Iraq's Presidential Council (comprising the President and the two Vice-Presidents) had ratified the death sentences of 128 people whose sentences had already been confirmed by the Cassation Court. The authorities are said to be planning to carry out the executions in batches of 20 per week.

The Iraqi authorities have not disclosed the identities of those facing imminent execution, stoking fears that many of them may have been sentenced to death after trials that failed to satisfy international standards for fair trial. Most are likely to have been sentenced to death by the Central Criminal Court of Iraq (CCCI), whose proceedings consistently fall short of international standards for fair trial. Some are likely to have been convicted of crimes such as murder and kidnapping on the basis of confessions they allege were extracted under torture during their pre-trial detention by Iraqi security forces, without their allegations being investigated adequately or at all by the CCCI. Torture of detainees held by Iraqi security forces remains rife.

"Iraq's creaking judicial system is simply unable to guarantee fair trials in ordinary criminal cases, and even less so in capital cases, with the result, we fear, that numerous people have gone to their death after unfair trials," said Malcolm Smart. "Iraq continues to be plagued by high levels of political violence but the death penalty is no answer and, due to its brutalizing effect, may be making the situation worse. The Iraqi government should order an immediate halt to these executions and establish a moratorium on all further executions in Iraq."

Amnesty International is calling on the Iraqi authorities to make public all information pertaining to the 128 people, including their full names, details of the charges against them, the dates of their arrest, trial and appeal and their current place/s of detention.

Background:

The use of the death penalty has been increasing at an alarming rate in Iraq since the government reintroduced it in August 2004. This followed a suspension of more than one year by the Coalition

Provisional Authority. Since then, scores have been executed and hundreds of people have been sentenced to death.

Last year least 285 people were sentenced to death, and at least 34 executed. In 2007 at least 199 people were sentenced to death and 33 were executed, while in 2006 at least 65 people were put to death. However, the actual figures could be much higher as there are no official statistics for the number of prisoners facing execution and the Iraqi media's reporting of death sentences is erratic at best.