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Belarus carries out two executions

Amnesty International is calling on the President of Belarus Alyaksandr Lukashenka to establish an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty after it was revealed two men were executed at the end of last week.

Andrei Zhuk and Vasily Yuzepchuk were both sentenced to death in 2009 for separate crimes but had been sharing a death row cell in the capital Minsk. Andrei Zhuk's mother told Amnesty International on Monday she was informed by prison staff that both men had been shot.

"The death penalty is the ultimate cruel and inhuman punishment. It violates the right to life and should be abolished," Halya Gowan, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director, said.

"No executions were reported in Belarus in 2009 and for the first time since Amnesty International began keeping records Europe was an execution-free zone last year. It is very disappointing that the Belarussian authorities have taken this step, against the tide of world opinion that is moving toward the abolition of the death penalty."

Andrei Zhuk's mother tried to deliver a food parcel on Friday morning, 19 March, but the parcel was returned and she was told that the two men "had been moved" and that she should not come looking for her son anymore, but should wait for the notification from the court.

His father was taken to hospital on Monday having suffered a heart attack after hearing the news of the execution.

"Andrei Zhuk and Vasily Yuzepchuk were executed without being granted a last meeting with their relatives. The authorities must give their bodies and belongings to their relatives, should they wish to receive them. If they refuse to hand over the bodies, they must at least inform the relatives where their loved ones were buried," Halya Gowan said.

Vasily Yuzepchuk was sentenced to death on 29 June 2009, for the murder of six elderly women, following an investigation and trial which his lawyer argues were fundamentally flawed: he says that Vasily Yuzepchuk was beaten to force him to confess.

Andrei Zhuk was sentenced to death on 22 July 2009, for the armed assault on and murder of a man and woman in February 2009. His lawyer has expressed his concerns regarding procedural violations during Andrei Zhuk's initial interrogation.

Both men appealed against their sentences and were turned down. Both had applied for clemency, but

according to information received by Amnesty International the President's decision regarding clemency is communicated to prisoners minutes before they are executed.

In October 2009 the UN Human Rights Committee registered both cases and called on the Belarusian government not to execute the two men pending the Committee's consideration of their cases.

The death sentences of Andrei Zhuk and Vasily Yuzepchuk were passed shortly after the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted to restore Special Guest Status to the Belarusian Parliament, on the condition that Belarus declare a moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty.