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Death Penalty in 2009: Amnesty International challenges China's secrecy

Amnesty International today challenged the Chinese authorities to reveal how many people they execute and sentence to death, as the organization published its world overview of the death penalty for 2009.

The report, *Death Sentences and Executions in 2009*, reveals that at least 714 people were executed in 18 countries and at least 2001 people were sentenced to death in 56 countries last year.

This excludes the thousands of executions that were likely to have taken place in China, where information on the death penalty remains a state secret.

In a challenge to China's lack of transparency, Amnesty International has decided not to publish its own minimum figures for Chinese executions and death sentences in 2009. Estimates based on the publicly available information grossly under represent the actual number the state killed or sentenced to death.

"The death penalty is cruel and degrading, and an affront to human dignity," said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty International's Interim Secretary General.

"The Chinese authorities claim that fewer executions are taking place. If this is true, why won't they tell the world how many people the state put to death?"

Amnesty International's research shows that countries that still carry out executions are the exception rather than the rule. In addition to China, the worst offending nations were Iran with at least 388 executions, Iraq at least 120, Saudi Arabia at least 69 and the USA with 52.

The past year saw capital punishment applied extensively to send political messages, to silence opponents or to promote political agendas in China, Iran and Sudan, according to Amnesty International's report.

In Iran, 112 executions were known to have taken place in the eight-week period between the presidential election on 12 June and the inauguration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for a second term as President on 5 August.

The report addresses the discriminatory way the death penalty was applied in 2009, often after grossly unfair trials, and used disproportionately against the poor, minorities and members of racial, ethnic and religious communities.

Yet the figures also show that the world continued to move towards abolition in 2009. The number of countries that have removed capital punishment entirely from their laws rose to 95 as Burundi and Togo abolished the death penalty for all crimes.

For the first year since Amnesty International began keeping records, no executions took place in Europe in 2009. Belarus is the only country in the region that continues to use the death penalty. Across the Americas, the USA was the only country to carry out executions.

“Fewer countries than ever before are carrying out executions. As it did with slavery and apartheid, the world is rejecting this embarrassment to humanity,” said Claudio Cordone. “We are moving closer to a death penalty free world, but until that day every execution must be opposed.”

Regional Summaries:

- In Asia, thousands of executions were likely to have taken place in China, where information on the death penalty remains a state secret. Only seven other countries were known to have carried out executions - Bangladesh, Japan, North Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam - with 26 executions known to have taken place.

Afghanistan, Indonesia, Mongolia and Pakistan did not carry out executions in 2009, the first execution-free year in those countries in recent times.

- In the Middle East and North Africa at least 624 executions were known to have been carried out in seven countries: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and Iran executed seven people who were under 18 at the time of the alleged offence, in violation of international law.

Several countries - Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco/Western Sahara and Tunisia - maintained longstanding moratoriums on executions.

- No executions took place in Europe in 2009. Belarus remains the only nation to use the death penalty in the region. Although no one was executed in the former Soviet country last year, two people were killed by the state in March 2010.
- In sub-Saharan Africa only two countries executed prisoners: Botswana and Sudan. The largest mass commutation of death sentences ever known to Amnesty International took place in Kenya as the government announced that more than 4,000 condemned prisoners would have their sentences commuted to imprisonment.

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