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Japan executions of two men condemned

Amnesty International has condemned the executions of two Japanese men in the first death sentences carried out since the country's new government came to power last year.

Convicted killers Ogata Hidenori, 33, and Shinozawa Kazuo, 59, were hanged in the Tokyo Detention Centre on Wednesday, exactly one year after the last executions took place.

"Japan continues to go against the international trend toward abolition and mete out this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment," said Donna Guest, Deputy Director of the Asia Pacific Programme.

"A day that should have marked one year without executions has instead seen Japan return to carrying out state-sponsored killings."

The executions are the first to be approved by Minister of Justice, Keiko Chiba, since she took office under the Democratic Party of Japan in September 2009.

Minister Chiba, who has previously spoken out against executions, announced plans to set up a working group on the death penalty within the Ministry of Justice, following the double hanging.

However, there are concerns among non-governmental organizations in Japan that more executions will take place outside of Tokyo in the coming days. There are currently 107 people on death row in Japan.

"A working group to discuss the death penalty is not enough. There needs to be an open and public debate and an immediate moratorium on executions while the discussion takes place," said Donna Guest.

Shinozawa Kazuo was convicted of killing six women when he set fire to a jewellery shop in 2000, while Ogata Hidenori was sentenced to death for killing a man and a woman in 2003.

Background

Japan executed seven people in 2009 but no death row inmates had been killed since 28 July 2009.

Executions in Japan are by hanging and are typically carried out in secret. Death row inmates are only notified on the morning of their execution and their families are usually informed only after the execution has taken place.

This means that prisoners live in constant fear of execution. Enduring these conditions for years or even decades has led to depression and mental illness among death row inmates.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases as a violation of the right to life. It calls on the government of Japan to immediately commute all death sentences and introduce a formal moratorium on executions as a first step towards abolition of the death penalty.