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Afghanistan: Journalist should be freed

Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh should be freed immediately as there have never been legal grounds for his conviction or sentence, Amnesty International said today, in response to the news that a death sentence on him has been quashed by an Afghan appeals court.

He was arrested on 27 October 2007 for reportedly downloading information from the internet that examined the role of women in Islam, adding some commentary and distributing it at Balkh University. He has denied this, saying that he had been coerced into making a "confession".

On 22 January 2008 he was sentenced to death by a primary court in the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif for "blasphemy" in what Amnesty International believes was an unfair trial.

The organization urges President Karzai and Afghan authorities to free Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh, who still faces 20 years' imprisonment for a crime which, under Article 347 of the country's Penal Code, carries a maximum sentence of five years' imprisonment.

"There are no legal grounds for either his conviction or this sentence. While it can only be a positive step that he is no longer on death row, he should be freed immediately," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Director.

The organization also called on President Karzai to immediately reintroduce a moratorium on all executions in Afghanistan, with a view to an eventual complete abolition of the death penalty.

Background

Between 70 and 110 people are believed to remain on death row in Afghanistan. This is despite the UN General Assembly's adoption of a resolution on 18 December 2007, calling for a worldwide moratorium on the use of the death penalty and at a time when a total of 135 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice.