

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 GMT 26 AUGUST 1997**China: Death penalty breaks new records**

1996 was a record-breaking year for death sentences and executions in China, with yet again more people executed than in the rest of the world's countries put together, Amnesty International said today, as it released its death penalty log for the year.

The worldwide human rights organization recorded more than 6,100 death sentences and 4,367 confirmed executions in China, although it believes the actual figures to be much higher. These represent the highest recorded figures since the mass executions which took place in 1983. Ukraine recorded the second highest number of executions during the year, with 167.

The number of death sentences recorded last year was almost double the total for 1995, when Amnesty International recorded 3,110, and 2,190 executions. The increase in 1996 was largely due to the "*yanda*" or "Strike Hard" campaign against crime launched by the authorities in March. This campaign harked back to a similar campaign in 1983 which has become a byword in Chinese legal circles for the worst abuses of the legal system, the organization said. The campaign was characterized by summary procedures and arbitrary punishment with evidence of the death penalty falling disproportionately on people of a low social status.

"The reality of the Strike Hard campaign has contrasted starkly with the promise of a revitalized justice system signalled by legal reforms announced the same year. As long as the campaign continues, sincerity and commitment to these reforms will be called into question," Amnesty International said.

According to the organization, trials are frequently unfair, the process is heavily weighted in favour of the prosecution, defendants have little chance of adequate legal representation or the time to prepare their defence, guilt is often presumed in advance of the trial and the appeals process is severely limited.

"International standards require the most careful legal procedures and all possible safeguards for defendants in death penalty cases," Amnesty International said. "At a time when the judicial system in China still lacks important legal safeguards and has alarming potential for miscarriages of justice, the Government continues to execute its citizens in ever increasing numbers."

"Throughout the 1990s, legal scholars and practitioners in China have pointed to loopholes and irregularities which lead to miscarriages of justice and bring the legal system into disrepute. Their concerns have not been comprehensively addressed in recent legal reforms. Despite some positive legal changes the authorities have failed bring the legal system in line with international standards."

The number of crimes which are punishable by death has spiralled over the last decade, particularly for non-violent crimes such as embezzlement, fraud and theft. Among those executed were Hou Zhijiang and Wei Xuemeng, who were executed in Shanghai on June 25 for stealing ballpens and badminton racquets valued at US\$7,000, and Chen Zhong and two other men who were executed in Sichuan on June 26 for attempting to steal value added tax (VAT) receipts from a tax office. Wang Hongjun was sentenced to death in Sichuan on 10 December for stealing a cultural artifact which he sold for US\$36. He had no defence lawyer at his trial.

