

AI Index: ASA 22/03/91

Distr: SC/PO

1501 hrs gmt Thursday 24 January 1991

**£JAPAN: @AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR END TO EXECUTIONS
AND SAFEGUARDS AGAINST ILL-TREATMENT**

Amnesty International today urged the Japanese government to commute all death sentences in Japan and outlaw executions.

In a report released today, the organization also called for investigations into reports that police have ill-treated suspects in custody and for safeguards against ill-treatment.

Over 80 prisoners are currently on death row and almost half of them have lost appeals against their sentences, which have been finalized by the Supreme Court.

The government rarely commutes individual death sentences - the last one was in 1975 - and there has been no general amnesty commuting death sentences since 1952.

"Fifteen people are known to have been hanged in the past decade, although executions are not announced or reported in the press," Amnesty International said.

The death sentence can be passed for any one of 18 crimes in Japan but has only been imposed for murder during the last 20 years.

The government says the majority of the public support the death penalty "to punish those who commit vicious offences."

"But Amnesty International believes many more people might support abolition if they were properly informed of the facts surrounding the use of the death penalty, which is a cruel and inhuman punishment that violates the most fundamental human right - the right to life," the organization said.

The organization has also investigated claims of police ill-treatment for several years and interviewed a number of former prisoners in 1989 who said they were beaten, threatened with long sentences or forced to undergo long interrogation sessions which left them exhausted and confused.

One 18-year-old arrested in 1979 told Amnesty International he was repeatedly hit by police officers until he confessed to murder. When he was acquitted and released in 1986, the appeal court said: "We cannot say with certainty whether the [false] confession was the result of violence, but it cannot be denied that violence was used."

A 1988 survey by the Joint Committee of the Three Tokyo Bar Associations also recorded 26 allegations of police abuse since 1983, one case resulting in a prisoner's death. Most of the prisoners in these cases were acquitted after appeal courts found that the evidence against them, including confessions made during police interrogation, did not stand up to scrutiny.

Amnesty International is calling for a review of current detention procedures, which it says could easily lead to police abuses.

Suspects are frequently held in police cells rather than detention centres, even though police cells are only meant to be used as an exception.

"Our experience shows that when the police are both investigating a case and are responsible for the detention of the suspects, there is a greater risk of abuse," the organization said.

Amnesty International said that separate authorities should be responsible for the interrogation and detention of prisoners. The use of threats or intimidation against prisoners should be banned, the complaints procedures strengthened and the government should also ratify the United Nations Convention Against Torture without delay.

EMBARGOED FOR 1501 HRS GMT THURSDAY 24 JANUARY 1991