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Japan: Amnesty International condemns executions

As four more people were hanged in secret last Friday, Amnesty International condemned Japan's death penalty system and called for a parliamentary debate on the issue.

Those executed on 1 August included a woman and a well-known writer who had been under sentence of death for 18 years.

"Executions in Japan are extremely cruel -- they are carried out in secret, without the knowledge of families and appear to be inflicted in an arbitrary fashion. Prisoners often spend decades under sentence of death, never knowing which day will be their last," Amnesty International said today.

The four prisoners, all convicted of murder, appear to have been selected at random from some 55 prisoners whose sentences had been finalized. As usual, they and their families were given no advance warning of the impending executions.

Writer Nagayama Norio was among those executed after spending 28 years in prison. After a lengthy trial, his final appeal was turned down 10 years ago. He was sentenced for a crime committed when he was 19-years-old.

Death sentences and executions have risen in recent years. Between 1989 and 1993 there were no executions, but since 1993 there have been 25. They are carried out at irregular periods and it is impossible to know when or against whom the next ones will be inflicted. Those executed in recent years included a man over the age of 70 and a man suffering from mental illness.

Prisoners under sentence of death are treated in a cruel and inhuman fashion. They are generally held in solitary confinement cells where they are forced to sit in the same position all day. Many of them are suffering from psychological problems associated with their conditions of imprisonment and the stress of their situation. Under constant surveillance by prison guards, some are given no opportunity to converse with other prisoners and are denied visitors apart from their immediate family. Amnesty International knows of several cases where lawyers acting on behalf of prisoners under sentence of death have been denied access to their clients.

Amnesty International is calling on the Japanese government to abolish the death penalty in law. Pending abolition it is urging the authorities to improve the treatment of prisoners under sentence of death, to end the secrecy surrounding executions and to initiate a parliamentary debate on the use of the death penalty.

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