

11 December 2000

AI Index ASA 35/015/2000 - News Service Nr. 233

Philippines: President Estrada gives hope to death row inmates

Amnesty International warmly welcomed President Joseph Estrada's Human Rights Day announcement on December 10, commuting the death sentences of prisoners in the Philippines. The commutation is expected to apply to over 110 prisoners whose sentences have already been confirmed by the Supreme Court. Since the death penalty was restored in late 1993 over 1,400 other prisoners have been sentenced to death.

"President Estrada's commutation of these death sentences is a major step in the struggle to uphold respect for that most central of human rights - the right to life," Amnesty International said today.

"We urge that all prisoners facing execution in the Philippines now and in the future have their death sentences commuted, and that Congress, in recognition that there is no evidence that the death penalty deters crime more than other punishments, moves quickly towards a review and eventual repeal of the death penalty law."

President Estrada also announced his intention to reprieve and release some 200 political prisoners convicted or being prosecuted for offences allegedly committed within the context of armed insurgency. The announcement followed the signing of a local peace agreement with the Alex Boncayao Brigade, a breakaway faction of the communist New Peoples Army (NPA) which has been waging a revolutionary armed struggle since the early 1970s.

Background

Seven men have been executed by lethal injection since executions resumed in February 1999 after a period of 23 years. In March 2000 President Estrada announced a temporary moratorium on executions to mark the Christian Jubilee year.

Local human rights groups, the Roman Catholic and other churches and Amnesty International have repeatedly expressed opposition to the death penalty and called for its abolition. The death penalty is an inherently unjust and arbitrary punishment which is imposed disproportionately on those who are poorer and less educated.

Amnesty International is also concerned that the risk of executing innocent people has been sharply increased in the Philippines by consistent, credible reports of patterns of ill-treatment and torture by police in order to coerce confessions from criminal suspects. The organization believes that genuine crime deterrence lies not in the prospect of the death penalty, but in the certainty of arrest, conviction and imprisonment.

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