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Iran: Commute death sentences imposed for drinking alcohol

Two men found guilty for the third time of consuming alcohol – forbidden under Iran’s Penal Code – must not be executed, Amnesty International said.

The head of the judiciary in north-eastern Khorasan Razavi province, Seyed Hassan Shariati, announced that the authorities were preparing to carry out death sentences upheld by the Supreme Court in Tehran.

The two men, whom the authorities have not named, each received 80 lashes following their two previous convictions for alcohol consumption.

Article 179 of Iran’s Penal Code provides for a mandatory death sentence following the third conviction for drinking alcohol. A revised version of the Penal Code which has not yet come into force continues to provide this most severe of penalties for repeated convictions for this offence.

“We oppose the death penalty in all cases, but even so alcohol consumption cannot reasonably be classified as one of the ‘most serious crimes’, the internationally agreed minimum standard for capital crimes to be used by those countries who still retain the death penalty,” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Programme.

“It is regrettable that the Iranian authorities did not take advantage of their recent review of the Penal Code to uphold their international human rights obligations and remove the penalties of flogging and execution for alcohol consumption.”

Despite the severe penalties in place for its production, trade or consumption, alcohol is readily available on the black market in Iran.

The announcement of the executions followed a media debate earlier this year concerning reports of rising alcohol consumption in the country and calls to find new ways to address the issue.

Although death sentences for alcohol use are relatively rare, Iran frequently imposes the death penalty for drugs offences – particularly trafficking more than specified amounts of various narcotics or other illegal drugs – despite there being no clear evidence that the death penalty serves as an effective deterrent against drug-related offences.

Iran is second only to China in terms of the volume of death penalties carried out annually, with many of the more than 600 executions believed to have taken place in 2011 carried out behind a cloak of secrecy.

The vast majority of executions in the country are for drug-related offences.

International standards prohibit the use of the death penalty except for “crimes with an intention to kill which resulted in the loss of life”, and the UN Human Rights Committee has on numerous occasions found that drug-related offences do not meet this criterion.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases as the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

“Iran must stop imposing the death penalty on alleged drugs and alcohol offenders, as a first step towards abolishing capital punishment outright,” said Ann Harrison.