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UN: Support for a moratorium on the death penalty grows

A vote to establish a moratorium on the death penalty at the UN General Assembly's human rights committee has given a further boost to the global goal of ending the use of capital punishment.

The Assembly's Third Committee, which addresses social, humanitarian and human rights issues, adopted today its fourth draft resolution calling for a moratorium on executions. The call for a moratorium has garnered steadily increasing support since the first resolution was adopted in 2007.

110 states voted in favour, 36 abstained and 39 voted against the resolution in the Third Committee, equal to one more vote in support and two fewer in opposition when compared to the last Assembly vote on a moratorium in 2010. The draft resolution was co-sponsored by 91 UN Member States from all regions of the world, the highest number yet.

"Today's vote is yet another clear signal that the world's journey towards abolition of the death penalty is unstoppable," said José Luis Díaz, Amnesty International's representative at the United Nations in New York.

When the UN was founded in 1945 only eight of the then 51 UN member states had abolished the death penalty. Today, 94 states have abolished the death penalty for all crimes, and in total 137 out of the 193 UN member states have abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

New votes in favour included Central African Republic, Niger, Tunisia and South Sudan. As a further positive sign, Afghanistan, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia moved from opposition to abstention. Most supporting vote changes came from the African region. Regrettably, Oman and Mauritania withdrew support for the resolution, while Maldives and Sri Lanka went from a vote in favour to an abstention.

Five amendments aimed at weakening the text of the resolution were voted down before a vote on the draft resolution as a whole.

"The message from the Third Committee is clear. Decision makers from all around the world should seize this opportunity and work together to make the moratorium on the use of the death penalty a global reality," added Díaz.

The vote in Third Committee is an important indicator for the main vote on the resolution in the General Assembly Plenary this December 2012, when the resolution is expected to be endorsed. Although not legally binding, UN General Assembly resolutions carry considerable moral and political weight.

Amnesty International urges all UN Member States to support the plenary resolution. Those countries still retaining the death penalty should immediately establish a moratorium on executions as a first step towards full abolition.

Background information

The first UN General Assembly resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty, resolution 62/149, was adopted in December 2007 by 104 votes in favour, 54 against and 29 abstentions.

The UN General Assembly has adopted two other resolutions on the matter, resolutions 63/168 in 2008 and 65/206 in 2010, both of which met increased cross-regional support. In 2008, 106 States voted in favour, 46 against and 34 abstained, while in 2010, 109 supported the resolution, 41 opposed it and 35 abstained.

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The adoption of these ground-breaking resolutions on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty since 2007 has generated momentum among civil society and international governmental organizations to renew their commitment to the abolition of the death penalty.

Support for the UN call for a moratorium on executions has been widely shown through statements, declarations and resolutions that have been issued since December 2007.

Among others, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted a similar resolution in 2008, calling on African States to observe a moratorium on the execution of death sentences with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, in a report on the death penalty in the Americas released in August 2012, also recommended that States in that region "impose a moratorium as a step towards the gradual disappearance of this penalty."

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has likewise called for a moratorium in those of its participating States that have not yet established one.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty, which violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Organization opposes capital punishment in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime; guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual; or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. It violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The organization has been campaigning to support United Nations calls for a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

For further information, see <http://www.amnesty.org/en/death-penalty>