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Japan: Now is the time to show leadership on human rights

(Tokyo) As a major economic and political power, Japan must do more to promote human rights at home and abroad. Its approach to human rights must stop being cautious abroad and conservative at home, said Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan concluding her five-day mission to Tokyo.

"Japan must start by putting its own house in order."

While welcoming the recent legislation to improve the treatment of prisoners, Amnesty International cautioned that there remain major deficiencies that need to be addressed urgently.

"Secrecy prevails under the *Daiyo Kangoku* (pre-trial) detention system. Unmonitored interrogations and forced confessions are unacceptable," emphasized Ms Khan.

"*Daiyo Kangoku* is a blot on Japan's human rights record and must be abolished immediately."

"The number of persons sentenced to death in Japan last year reached a 25-year high, bucking the international trend on the abolition of capital punishment," stated Ms Khan.

"Japan is only one of two G8 countries that continues to execute people."

Amnesty International called on the Government of Japan to introduce an immediate moratorium on the death penalty and to initiate a public debate on its abolition.

"The risk of miscarriage of justice, particularly given the prevalence of confession-based convictions and the use of the *Daiyou Kangoku* system, is unacceptably high and therefore the death penalty must go."

Amnesty International criticized the prolonged and widespread detention of asylum seekers, that on average exceeds 13 months. During this period, many of them are denied access to medical treatment.

"The Japanese government should immediately establish a formal process to review all those in detention. Detention should be used only in exceptional circumstances," stressed Ms Khan.

Noting the defects in the refugee recognition procedure, the organization urged the government to ensure a fair and transparent system -- in line with Japan's obligations under the 1951 Convention.

The Japanese government acknowledged the need for more training and requested Amnesty

International's help.

Japan has been the subject of criticism for its poor handling of human trafficking. Noting the efforts of the government to redress the problem, Amnesty International underlined that much more must be done to protect the victims, who are mainly women and girls.

"Human rights do not stop on the borders of Japan. Given the major human rights problems in this region -- from North Korea to Indonesia, Afghanistan to Myanmar -- the government must be bold about injecting human rights considerations into its foreign policies. It must be clear about its commitment to international justice, arms control and reform of the UN human rights machinery," continued Ms Khan.

Amnesty International called on Japan to support the proposal for an Arms Trade Treaty at the forthcoming G8 Summit.

The organization also called on Japan to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

"Although supportive of the International Criminal Court, Japan is dragging its feet on accession. Speedy accession would send a clear and unambiguous message of Japan's commitment to international justice," declared Ms Khan.

Initiatives to reform the United Nations provide Japan with an opportunity to show leadership, not just on the expansion of the UN Security Council but also on the creation of a more authoritative and credible UN Human Rights Council.

"Japan's ambition to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council must be underpinned by an equally strong determination to deliver on its human rights obligations," concluded Ms Khan.

"The time to show leadership is now."

Background

During her five-day mission to Japan, Irene Khan met with Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiroyuki Hosoda, Minister of Justice Chieko Nono, senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the President of the Japan International Cooperation Agency Sadako Ogata, Diet members, the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, corporate leaders, local NGOs, diplomats and academics.

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