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Proposed China death penalty reforms may have no great impact on executions

Amnesty International warned today that proposed reforms of China's application of the death penalty may not result in significantly fewer executions.

Chinese government news agency Xinhua reported today that proposed amendments to China's criminal code may see the death penalty removed from 13 out of 68 crimes that currently carry the punishment. The draft amendments are working their way through numerous readings in China's legislative chamber.

"Although we would welcome any reform that would in practice decrease executions in China, we are not yet convinced that these legal revisions will have a significant impact" said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Deputy-Director for the Asia-Pacific.

As part of its campaigning against the death penalty, Amnesty International has called on China to reduce the number of capital crimes.

"We are still waiting for the Chinese government to release the data that shows these proposed revisions are more than just legal housekeeping, removing crimes which have seldom been punished with the death penalty in recent years" said Catherine Baber.

The draft amendment to China's criminal code would, if passed, reportedly remove the death penalty as a punishment for white collar crimes such as tax fraud, and for smuggling valuables and cultural relics. It would also remove the death penalty as a punishment for those over 75 years of age.

The ultimate impact of any reforms to China's use of the death penalty cannot be publicly known and evaluated due to classification of execution figures as state secrets.

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese government to make the draft legislation and the national execution figures public, so that there can be transparent analysis and debate on the death penalty.

In a challenge to China's lack of transparency, Amnesty International declined to publish its own minimum figures for Chinese executions and death sentences in its worldwide annual report this year on the death penalty. China is estimated to be the world's biggest executor.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception, as the ultimate violation of human rights.