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@DEATH PENALTY APPEAL

USSR - Aleksandr MOSKVIN

On 25 September 1991 the newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya (Soviet Russia) reported that a man has been sentenced to death in the Orenburg region of the Russian Republic. The death sentence was passed on Aleksandr Moskvin, who is in his twenties, after he was convicted of the murder of a 14-year-old boy and his mother in the village of Mikhaylovka.

The newspaper did not give a date for the trial, and Amnesty International does not know whether Aleksandr Moskvin has appealed against his sentence or lodged a petition for clemency. Official sources report that it can take some two years for an appeal to pass through the various stages.

Amnesty International is opposed to the death penalty in all cases without reservation, on the grounds that it is a violation of the right to life and the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amnesty International is appealing to the President of the RSFSR to exercise his constitutional authority and commute the death sentence passed on Aleksandr Moskvin.

Background

Death sentences are regularly passed and carried out in the USSR, but official Soviet sources do not always announce subsequent developments in individual cases and it is therefore frequently not known if death sentences are carried out or if they are commuted. Indeed, until recently, statistics on the number of sentences and executions were a state secret. However on 16 January 1991, the USSR Minister of Justice, Sergey Lushchikov, announced such statistics for the first time since 1934. He covered five years, from 1985 to 1989. The figures given reported a year-by-year decrease in the number of sentences from 770 in 1985, of which 20 were commuted, to 271 in 1988, of which 72 were commuted. However, the figures for 1989 showed a slight rise in death sentences, up to 276, but a significant drop in commutations, down to 23. Figures recently released for 1990 show this trend has continued. At a press-conference held on 5 March 1991 the USSR Ministry of Justice reported that 445 death sentences were passed and 195 people were executed in 1990. According to an article published in Izvestiya in April, 226 petitions for clemency were heard by the Clemency Commission in 1990, but in only 18 cases were the sentences commuted. In July

Gennady Cheremnykh, head of the USSR parliamentary clemency body, confirmed that 208 death sentences were carried out in 1990, chiefly in the RSFSR and the Ukrainian SSR.

Much of classical socialist doctrine has rejected the use of the death penalty and, in conformity with socialist principles, Soviet criminal and penal theory since the founding of the Soviet State has tended formally to give preference to correction and re-education rather than punishment as a means of dealing with offenders and criminality. In spite of this, the death penalty has been in use throughout most of the history of the Soviet Union.

The criminal code has been undergoing extensive revision. On 1 July 1991 the Fundamentals of Criminal Legislation of the USSR and Republics were adopted and they were published on 19 July in the Soviet newspaper Izvestiya. Article 40, regulating the death penalty, came into force on the date of publication. The new legislation retains the death penalty for five crimes in peacetime: treason, premeditated murder with aggravating circumstances, rape of a minor with aggravating circumstances, kidnapping of a minor with especially grave consequences and grave crimes against the peace and security of mankind. Women are exempted under the new legislation from the death penalty, which also reaffirms exemption for those under 18. Women and those awaiting execution for crimes which no longer carry the death penalty have their sentences commuted to 15-year prison terms. The death penalty will be carried out, as before, by shooting.

In the absence of official statistics in the past, Amnesty International has monitored official and unofficial sources in the USSR for individual reports of death sentences and executions. For example, since the beginning of 1987, when the authorities first announced their review, at least 217 sentences and 40 executions have come to light in this way. The organization always believed that the total figures were much higher, however, and this is borne out by the recently-published statistics.