

002/00

AI INDEX: AMR 14/01/00

5 January 2000

Bahamas: State-sanctioned killing on Epiphany

The Bahamas is once again demonstrating its determination to carry out state-sanctioned killing with a scheduled hanging set to coincide with Epiphany this Friday, Amnesty International said today.

"The execution – set to coincide with the church festival celebrated on 6 January in commemoration of the manifestation of Christ to the Wise Men of the East -- would be a brutal reminder of where the Bahamas stands on the fundamental right to life," Amnesty International said.

Two men were originally scheduled to be hanged on Friday. Regrettably, Amnesty International has just heard that John Higgs succeeded in committing suicide, reportedly at around 2 a.m. this morning.

"This is an illustration of the brutal realities of the death penalty -- where subhuman conditions on death row compound the mental torture of cold, premeditated killing," Amnesty International said.

"People on death row have been convicted of appalling crimes, but society should not condone the killing of defenceless people, whatever they have done. Such killings condemn us all to live in a world where brutality is officially sanctioned and where murderers set the moral tone."

Amnesty International has joined other national and regional organisations and individuals in urging the government of the Bahamas to seek other solutions to violent crime than the use of state-sanctioned killing, which has never been shown to reduce the incidence of violent crime.

The organization has repeatedly voiced its concern that the two men were scheduled to be hanged despite having international appeals still pending before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), in violation of the country's international obligations.

"It is reported that the men's petitions are due to be considered in February 2000. One of the men has already taken his own life. By the time their petitions are considered, both of them might already be dead."

"This makes a mockery of the Inter-American system of human rights," Amnesty International stressed, urging the government of the Bahamas suspend the executions until the IACHR comes to a final decision on the petitions.

The organization also appealed to the authorities to impose a moratorium on the use of capital punishment as a first step towards permanent abolition, and in addition to commute every death sentence.

"The majority of elected officials in the Bahamas are too afraid of public support for the death penalty to openly question its use," Amnesty International said.

"This failure of leadership renders them complicit in the cycle of violence, and is generating increasing concern about the commitment of the Bahamas to human rights."

Additional information

An estimated 19 people are currently on death row in the Bahamas. The last two men to be executed were Trevor Nathaniel Pennerman and Richard Woods, on 15 October 1998. One of the hangings was reported to have been botched, nearly resulting in decapitation. David Mitchell is due to be hanged at 6:30 a.m. tomorrow morning.

ENDS.../

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office on +44 171 413 5566