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Philippines: Alarm bells ring for human rights as President announces about-turn on the death penalty

In a dramatic about-turn this week President Arroyo renounced her previous stance against the death penalty. "Executing people will not resolve the rise in crimes such as kidnapping and drug trafficking," Amnesty International said today, in response to the President's call for the execution of convicted kidnappers.

"The death penalty is nothing more than a brutal and unjust punishment that always carries the risk of extinguishing the lives of innocent people. This risk is heightened in the Philippines because of the lack of protection for detainees during interrogation. Many of those on death row were held incommunicado, tortured to coerce confessions, and then subjected to unfair trials," Amnesty International said.

President Arroyo also announced further that she wanted to reverse previous presidential decisions to commute death sentences. She is also considering executing convicted drug-traffickers and those found guilty of economic crimes. The Supreme Court has reportedly yet to review the death sentences of more than 90 convicted kidnappers, while two prisoners recently had their sentences confirmed.

While recognizing the urgent need to combat a serious law and order problem in the Philippines, and expressing sympathy for the victims of kidnappings, Amnesty International warned that the death penalty has never been shown to deter crimes more effectively than other punishments.

Over half of the countries of the world have abolished the death penalty. If the Philippine authorities unleash a flood of executions, not

only will they be violating the right to life -- one of the most basic of all human rights -- but they also be going against the tide of world opinion.

Amnesty International is urging the President not to resume executions and to find more effective measures to combat crime.

Background

Executions resumed in the Philippines in February 1999, after 23 years.

Seven people were executed by lethal injection before former President Estrada declared a moratorium in 2000 to mark the Christian Jubilee year. In March 2001 the newly inaugurated President Arroyo announced that she would not support the carrying out of executions. Her stance was welcomed by Amnesty International, domestic human rights groups and the Roman Catholic Church. Her about-turn this week appears to have been prompted by pressure from anti-crime lobbyists and by concerns that a high level of kidnappings was having an adverse effect on business and economic investment in the country.

The Philippines is believed to have one of the largest per capita death row populations in the world, with more than 1,500 prisoners under sentence of death. Most are poorly educated, impoverished and unable to afford the best possible lawyers for their defence.

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