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**PHILIPPINES: Government should halt move towards resumption of executions**

**MANILA** -- President Ramos should commute the death sentences of six men facing execution by lethal injection next year, Amnesty International said today as it called on the government to halt all moves towards the resumption of executions.

The six men's sentences have been confirmed by the Supreme Court, which recently cleared the way for the first execution -- of house painter Leo Echegaray -- to take place between February and August 1998. More than 400 others are now on death row with an average of up to 12 people being sentenced to death each month, among the highest rates in the world.

"If this execution -- the first for more than 20 years -- goes ahead, it will be a huge step backwards for human rights in the Philippines," said Mardi Mapa-Suplido, Chairperson of Amnesty International Pilipinas at a press conference today in Manila.

"The Philippines in recent years has been regarded in some ways as a positive role model for human rights protection in the region. Resuming executions, particularly where those sentenced may not have received a fair trial, would place the Philippines back amongst other governments with badly tarnished records."

In a report issued today, Amnesty International reveals disturbing accounts of the use of torture and ill-treatment against those accused of capital crimes. The report also highlights a serious lack of safeguards to ensure that those facing the death penalty in the Philippines have a fair trial. The majority of prisoners on death row come from the poorer and most disadvantaged sectors of society who do not have the means to find the best possible lawyer for their defence.

"No justice system in the world is infallible, so there are always risks that innocent people may be executed," Ms Mapa-Suplido said. "Allegations in the Philippines of torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects to coerce confessions together with unfair trials, sharply increase the risk of judicial error."

According to the worldwide human rights organization, government claims that executing prisoners will reduce crime rates are set to be proved false with the death penalty not acting as a deterrent. Instead, Amnesty International is calling for a sustained program of reform of the Philippine National Police, other criminal investigation agencies and elements of the judiciary. The government has a duty to inform the public that such reforms -- not the retributive execution of prisoners -- will best serve to increase the security of all Filipino citizens.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty as the ultimate violation of the right to life guaranteed under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The

organization believes that there is no such thing as a “humane” method of execution, rather that executions lead to the brutalization of society and cheapen regard for human life.

“President Ramos has stressed the sanctity of human life in his appeals for clemency on behalf of Filipino nationals sentenced to death in other Asian countries and the Middle East,” Ms Mapa-Suplido said. “He should exercise his power to grant clemency to those facing execution in his own country as well.”

### **Background**

In 1987 the Philippines set an historic precedent by becoming the first country in Asia in modern times to abolish the death penalty for all crimes. The move formed an important part in the struggle to rebuild respect for, and protection of, human rights following the overthrow of President Ferdinand Marcos. However, in December 1993 the death penalty was restored in response to public concern over escalating crime rates.

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