

AI INDEX: EUR 15/21/98

11 DECEMBER 1998

Bulgaria: abolition of the death penalty – a step forward in human rights protection

The decision to abolish the death penalty in Bulgaria – made on the day in which the world was celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – signals an important new commitment to protect fundamental human rights in the country, Amnesty International said today.

Following the National Assembly's vote to remove the death penalty from the Penal Code, Bulgaria joins the growing number of countries that have irrevocably renounced the use of this cruel and inhuman punishment. More than 100 countries around the world have so far abolished it either in law or practice.

The last execution in Bulgaria took place on 4 November 1989 – a year in which 14 people were subjected to this irrevocable sanction. Throughout the 1980s Bulgaria had one of the highest execution rates in Europe, with 27 people executed in 1986, 20 in 1987 and 26 in 1988.

A moratorium on executions was introduced in July 1990. However, the courts continued to pass death sentences on those convicted of aggravated murder. According to an unofficial report published in May 1998, 19 men were under sentence of death. In October and November three more men were sentenced to death.

Background

In the course of 1998 the Bulgarian authorities launched what appeared to be a concerted effort to abolish the death penalty. In February President Petar Stoyanov made a proposal to this effect to the Advisory Council on National Security. In July an amendment to the Penal Code came into force abolishing the death penalty for the offence under Article 324, paragraph 3 -- intentionally causing death to one or more persons as a result of a transport accident. In October the Legal Committee of the National Assembly recommended that the death penalty be abolished for all offences.

The first vote in the National Assembly on 27 November -- when the majority voting in favour of abolition included members of all parliamentary factions -- was a strong indication that the authorities were on the right course to finalize this decision on the day when Bulgarians joined the world in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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