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Death penalty 2011: Alarming levels of executions in the few countries that kill

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Countries that carried out executions in 2011 did so at an alarming rate but those employing capital punishment have decreased by more than a third compared to a decade ago, Amnesty International found in its annual review of death sentences and executions.

Only 10 percent of countries in the world, 20 out of 198, carried out executions last year.

People were executed or sentenced to death for a range of offences including adultery and sodomy in Iran, blasphemy in Pakistan, sorcery in Saudi Arabia, the trafficking of human bones in the Republic of Congo, and drug offences in more than 10 countries.

Methods of execution in 2011 included beheading, hanging, lethal injection and shooting.

Some 18,750 people remained under sentence of death at the end of 2011 and at least 676 people were executed worldwide.

But these figures do not include the thousands of executions that Amnesty International believes were carried out in China, where the numbers are suppressed.

Nor do they account for the probable extent of Iran's use of the death penalty – Amnesty International has had credible reports of substantial numbers of executions not officially acknowledged.

“The vast majority of countries have moved away from using the death penalty,” said Salil Shetty Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“Our message to the leaders of the isolated minority of countries that continue to execute is clear: you are out of step with the rest of the world on this issue and it is time you took steps to end this most cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. “

In the Middle East there has been a steep rise in recorded executions – up almost 50 per cent on the previous year.

This was due to four countries – Iraq (at least 68 executions), Iran (at least 360), Saudi Arabia (at least 82) and Yemen (at least 41) – which accounted for 99 per cent of all recorded executions in the Middle East and North Africa. The rise in Iran and Saudi Arabia alone accounted for the net increase in recorded executions across the world of 149, compared to 2010.

Thousands of people were executed in China in 2011, more than the rest of the world put together. Figures on the death penalty are a state secret. Amnesty International has stopped publishing figures it collects from public sources in China as these are likely to grossly underestimate the true number.

The organization renewed its challenge to the Chinese authorities to publish data on those executed and sentenced to death, in order to confirm their claims that various changes in law and practice have led to a significant reduction in the use of the death penalty in the country over the last four years.

In Iran, Amnesty International received credible reports of a large number of unconfirmed or even secret executions which would almost double the levels officially acknowledged.

At least three people were executed in Iran for crimes that were committed when they were under 18 years of age, in violation of international law. A further four unconfirmed executions of juvenile offenders were reported there, and one in Saudi Arabia.

The United States was again the only country in the Americas and the only member of the G8 group of leading economies to execute prisoners – 43 in 2011. Europe and former Soviet Union countries were capital punishment-free, apart from Belarus where two people were executed. The Pacific was death penalty-free except for five death sentences in Papua New Guinea.

In Belarus and Vietnam, prisoners were not informed of their forthcoming execution, nor were their families or lawyers. Public judicial executions were known to have been carried out in North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Somalia, as well as in Iran.

In the majority of countries where people were sentenced to death or executed, the trials did not meet international fair trial standards. In some, this involved the extraction of 'confessions' through torture or other duress including in China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

Foreign nationals were disproportionately affected by the use of the death penalty, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

But even in those countries that continue to execute on a high level some progress was made in 2011.

In China, the government eliminated the death penalty for 13 mainly 'white collar' crimes, and measures were also put forward to the National People's Congress to reduce the number of cases of torture in detention, strengthen the role of defence lawyers and ensure suspects in capital cases are represented by a lawyer.

In the USA, the number of executions and new death sentences dropped dramatically from a decade ago. Illinois became the 16th state to abolish the death penalty. A moratorium was announced in the state of Oregon. And victims of violent crimes spoke out against the death penalty

“Even among the small group of countries that executed in 2011, we can see gradual progress. These are small steps but such incremental measures have been shown ultimately to lead to the end of the death penalty,” said Salil Shetty.

“It is not going to happen overnight but we are determined that we will see the day when the death penalty is consigned to history.”

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception regardless of the nature of the crime, the characteristics of the offender or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. The death penalty violates the right to life and is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

Regional summaries

The Americas

The US was once again the only executioner in the Americas. A total of 43 executions were recorded in 13 of the 34 states that retain the death penalty, a drop by a third since 2001, and 78 new death sentences were recorded in 2011, a decrease by half since 2001.

The Caribbean

An execution-free area, with the number of countries imposing new death sentences appearing to be in decline. Only three countries are known to have handed down a total of six death sentences: Guyana, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago.

Asia-Pacific

Positive signs questioning the legitimacy of capital punishment were evident throughout the region in 2011. Not counting the thousands of executions that were believed to have taken place in China, at least 51 executions were reported to have been carried out in seven countries in the Asia-Pacific region. At least 833 new death sentences were known to have been imposed in 18 countries in the region. The Pacific sub-region was death penalty-free with the exception of five death sentences handed down in Papua New Guinea. No executions were recorded in Singapore and, for the first time in 19 years, Japan. The authorities in both countries have previously shown strong support for capital punishment.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Significant progress in 2011 - Benin adopted legislation to ratify the key UN treaty aimed at abolishing the death penalty. Sierra Leone declared, and Nigeria confirmed, official moratoriums on executions. And the Constitutional Review Commission in Ghana recommended the abolition of the death penalty. There were at least 22 executions in three countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. Only 14 of the 49 countries in the region are classified as retaining the death penalty.

Middle East and North Africa

At least 558 executions could be confirmed in eight countries. At least 750 death sentences imposed in 2011 could be confirmed in 15 countries. The continuing violence in countries such as Libya, Syria and Yemen made it particularly difficult to gather adequate information on the use of the death penalty in the region in 2011. No information was available about judicial executions in Libya, and no death sentences are known to have been imposed. Extrajudicial executions, torture and arbitrary detention were often resorted to instead.

Four countries – Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen – accounted for 99 per cent of all recorded executions in the Middle East and North Africa.

The authorities of Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco/Western Sahara and Qatar imposed death sentences but continued to refrain from carrying out executions.

Europe and Central Asia

Belarus was the only country in Europe and the former Soviet Union, and apart from the USA the only one in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to have carried out executions in 2011, executing two men.

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Notes to editors

Amnesty International experts on the death penalty are available for interview.

For more information, to request an embargo copy of the report and other supporting media materials including facts and figures, graphics, case studies and a short animation please contact

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