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Japan: Executions show “chilling escalation” in death penalty use

The execution of two death row inmates in Japan shows that a chilling escalation of death penalty use under the new Liberal Democratic government is continuing, Amnesty International said.

Today, two men - Yoshihide Miyagi, 56, and Katsuji Hamasaki, 64 – were hanged in Tokyo. They were both convicted of murder after shooting rival gang members to death in a restaurant in Ichihara city in 2005.

They are the fourth and fifth executions to take place in Japan since December 2012, when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office. The other three executions took place in February 2013. In total, Japan has executed 12 people since March 2012 – before then, no executions had been carried out for 20 months.

“This shocking news unfortunately reinforces our fears that the new government is increasing the pace of executions in an alarming way,” said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International’s Asia Pacific Director.

“We have already seen five executions this year, and it shows that the government has no intention of heeding international calls to start a genuine and open public debate on the death penalty including abolition.”

Ten people were hanged in less than a year during Shinzo Abe’s previous time as Prime Minister between September 2006 and September 2007. With current Justice Minister Sadakazu Tanigaki publicly expressing his support for the death penalty the concern is this may be surpassed.

“We urge the government to immediately reverse this worrying trend and impose a moratorium on the death penalty with a view to its eventual abolishment.”

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime, guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual 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.