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Viet Nam: National Assembly should seize opportunity to end death penalty

Lawmakers in Viet Nam should push for an immediate moratorium on the death penalty, Amnesty International said as the country debates reinstating execution by firing squad.

On 1 July 2011, Viet Nam passed a law replacing shooting by firing squad with lethal injections as its method of execution citing "humanitarian reasons".

However, implementation has been postponed twice and the country has been prevented from carrying out any executions ever since thanks to an EU-wide ban on the exportation of lethal injection drugs to Viet Nam.

With the Vietnamese National Assembly convening in Ha Noi until 23 November 2012, the prospect of a return to execution by shooting is being raised again.

"We urge lawmakers in Viet Nam to use this opportunity to call for a complete moratorium on executions, with a view of abolishing the death penalty. The death penalty is a violation of the right to life and the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment," said Janice Beanland, Amnesty International's Campaigner on Viet Nam.

"The notion that death by lethal injection is somehow more 'humane' is ludicrous – the death penalty is a violation of human rights in whatever form it takes. There is no guarantee that either lethal injections or the firing squad will reduce the immense pain and suffering of the victim, or the distress of the person carrying it out."

Statistics on the death penalty are a state secret in Viet Nam, but the government has now admitted that there are more than 500 prisoners on death row. Some 100 of these have "undergone relevant procedures" to be executed, and are being held indefinitely in harsh conditions.

"While it is positive that the government is being more transparent about their use of capital punishment, it is shocking as many as 500 prisoners are on death row," said Beanland.

According to reports from former inmates and law enforcement officials, prisoners on death row in Viet Nam are called "living ghosts" and kept in narrow cells where they are shackled to cement bunks.

Since January 2012, Amnesty International has recorded at least 70 new death sentences. Government officials have told state media that around 100 death sentences are imposed every year.

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.

“Reverting to firing squads does not in any way address the underlying problems with the application of the death penalty in Viet Nam, including its imposition after unfair trials,” said Beanland.