

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

11 July 2008

Index number: MDE 13/095/2008

Iran: First public executions since January 2008 ban are a retrograde step

Amnesty International today deplored the first public executions to be reported in Iran since the Head of the Judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi-Shahrudi banned such executions on 30 January 2008. It also expressed great concerns about the new draft Penal Code and other measures which seek to expand the number of crimes which carry the death penalty. It called on the Iranian authorities to uphold the ban on public executions and to take concrete steps to work towards the abolition of the death penalty, instead of increasing the number of crimes punishable by death.

The ban on public executions seemed to mark the recognition on the part of Ayatollah Shahrudi that carrying out executions in public adds to the already cruel, inhuman and degrading nature of the penalty and can only have a dehumanizing effect on the victim and a brutalizing effect on those who witness the execution. It is therefore extremely disappointing that permission was granted for these executions to take place in public, and for pictures to be circulated by news agencies despite the express instruction by Ayatollah Shahrudi that images depicting execution victims should not be published in the media.

Amnesty International was also extremely concerned that a new draft Penal Code currently under discussion by the Majles (Iran's parliament) does not reduce the scope of the death penalty in Iran, but expands it by introducing for example the crimes of apostasy, heresy and witchcraft into the Hodoud section of the Penal Code, and specifying the death penalty for these. Hodoud are crimes against divine will for which the penalty is prescribed by Islamic law. Another bill reportedly passed on first reading at the beginning of July aiming at increasing the protection of society's moral security also makes the creation of blogs and websites promoting corruption, prostitution and apostasy capital crimes.

The Iranian authorities should progressively and significantly reduce the number of offences which may incur the death penalty, in accordance with Article 6(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and paragraph 1 of the United Nations Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty, which stipulate that the death penalty, if it is to be applied at all, should be reserved for only the most serious crimes.

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK

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