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Death Penalty: Latest worldwide statistics released

(Geneva), By abolishing the death penalty in law or practice over half the countries in the world have set the path for the remaining states who continue to violate the right to life, said Amnesty International today.

Releasing its statistics on worldwide executions carried out during 2003, Amnesty International called on the UN Commission on Human Rights to take strong action against the death penalty at its annual session, currently sitting in Geneva, and to move to end all executions.

In a resolution adopted last year, the Commission on Human Rights called on countries that retain capital punishment "to establish a moratorium on executions". A similar resolution is due for consideration at the current session. Amnesty International urged all states to support it.

The organization also urged the Commission to reiterate its opposition to the use of the death penalty against child offenders -- people who were under 18 at the time of the offence. Two child offenders were executed in 2003, one in China and one in the USA.

Amnesty International's report revealed that China, Iran, the USA and Viet Nam accounted for 84 percent of the 1,146 known executions carried out in 28 countries in 2003.

In China, limited and incomplete records available to Amnesty International indicated that at least 726 people were executed in 2003, but the true figure was believed to be much higher. A senior Chinese legislator suggested in March 2004 that China executes "nearly 10,000" people each year. At least 108 executions were carried out in Iran. Sixty-five people were executed in the USA. At least 64 people were executed in Viet Nam.

At least 2,756 people were sentenced to death in 63 countries in 2003, according to Amnesty International's reports. The true figures were certainly higher.

Amnesty International's figures also showed that 77 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes by the end of 2003. This year the Samoan parliament adopted a bill in January abolishing the death penalty, while in March a royal decree abolishing capital punishment was issued in Bhutan.

"This year's figures show that as the majority of countries follow an abolitionist path, others choose to remain on the wrong side of the justice divide", Amnesty International said.

"Countries retaining the death penalty because of its supposed power as a unique deterrent to crime are flying in the face of scientific studies that fail to establish any such effect."

In Canada, for example, the homicide rate per 100,000 population has fallen 40 per cent since the abolition of the death penalty for murder in 1975.

Furthermore, the death penalty always carried the risk of executing the innocent can never be eliminated."

Since 1973, 113 prisoners have been released from death row in the USA after evidence emerged of their innocence of the crimes for which they were sentenced to death. Some came close to execution after spending many years under sentence of death. Recurring features in their cases include prosecutorial or police misconduct; use of unreliable witness testimony, physical evidence, or confessions; and inadequate defence representation. Other US prisoners have gone to their deaths despite serious doubts over their guilt.

"It is time for all governments to comply with their international obligations. The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment and a flagrant denial of the right to life," Amnesty International said.

For more information, please see:

"Death sentences and executions in 2003" <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACT500062004>

"The death penalty worldwide: Developments in 2003",

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACT500072004>

"Facts and Figures on the death penalty", <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGACT500082004>

"The death penalty: List of abolitionist and retentionist countries" <http://web.amnesty.org/deathpenalty>

"Ratification of international treaties" <http://amnesty.org/deathpenalty>

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