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Human rights groups condemn two new Belarus death sentences

Amnesty International has joined leading Belarusian human rights groups in condemning the death sentences handed down to two men convicted of murder in the city of Grodno.

Aleg Gryshkautsou (29) and Andrei Burdyka (28) were sentenced to death by shooting on 14 May 2010 for crimes committed during an armed robbery on a flat in Grodno in October 2009. Both men were found guilty of premeditated murder, armed assault, arson, kidnapping of a minor, theft and robbery.

“The death penalty is not the answer to violent crime. At a time when the world is moving towards abolition of the death penalty, Belarus is taking a step backwards,” said Halya Gowan, director of Amnesty International’s Europe and Central Asia Programme.

Aleg Gryshkautsou and Andrei Burdyka have 10 days to appeal against the sentence to the Supreme Court. If refused, they can apply to Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka for clemency.

Belarus remains the only country in Europe that is still carrying out executions. Amnesty International, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee and the Human Rights Centre “Vyasna”, have jointly called on the Belarusian authorities to signal their desire to abolish the death penalty by commuting both sentences.

“We will judge the government on the basis of its acts, and by sentencing these two men the government is demonstrating its true intention of continuing the use of this brutal and pointless punishment. The only convincing declaration would be to declare a moratorium,” said Aleg Gulak, Chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee.

Oleg Grishkovtsov and Andrei Burdyko reportedly robbed a flat in Grodno in October, killing one man and two women and taking a child hostage. They reportedly set fire to the flat and then forced a taxi driver to drive them to Minsk or Moscow, but were detained the following morning in Belarus when the taxi driver escaped.

The death sentences come two days after a UN Universal Periodic Review Working Group session at which Belarus came under criticism for its retention of the death penalty.

The government stated that the death penalty is a temporary measure, applied only for the gravest crimes, and that abolition is being actively discussed.

“The death sentences passed against Aleg Gryshkautstou and Andrei Burdyka once again demonstrate the need to immediately impose a moratorium on the death penalty. It is clear that as long as the death penalty is retained in law, judges will continue to hand down death sentences,” said Halya Gowan.

Two men were executed in Belarus in March. Vasily Yuzepchuk was executed for the murder of six elderly women, while Andrei Zhuk received the death penalty for the armed assault on and murder of a man and woman.