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MAURITIUS: DEATH PENALTY VOTE TIPS THE WORLD TOWARD ABOLITION

Amnesty International applauded yesterday's decision by the Mauritius parliament to abolish the death penalty in law, hailing it as a triumph for human rights with worldwide significance.

By adopting the law to eliminate the death penalty for all crimes on 3 August by a large majority, the Mauritius authorities tipped the global scale towards abolition, making a majority of 98 countries that have now eliminated capital punishment in law or in practice.

Although a minority of 96 countries around the world still retain and use the death penalty, there is a continuing trend towards abolition of this cruel and irrevocable punishment. With the Mauritius action, which follows a 6 June decision by South Africa's Constitutional Court that the death penalty contravenes that country's constitution, a total of seven states in Africa have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice during the past five years.

"This is a positive development that sets a standard for the 96 other governments retaining the death penalty to follow the example of Mauritius," Amnesty International said.

According to local Mauritius press reports, Attorney General Sir Maurice Rault has told the country: "I am convinced that a state that kills its members is mutilating itself."

Yesterday's abolition came after two days of debate in parliament, with intensive lobbying work by Amnesty International's local section in Mauritius. Fifty-two members of parliament, out of a total of 66, voted in favour of abolition.

Amnesty International also urged the Mauritius government to ratify the Second Optional Protocol of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. That protocol, concerning the death penalty, commits states not to carry out any executions and to take "all necessary measures" to abolish the death penalty.

"The Mauritius parliament should build on this positive accomplishment and permanently abolish the death penalty by a constitutional amendment as well as ordinary law," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International said it hopes that the Mauritius abolition will be heeded in particular by countries which still use the death penalty, or are considering re-introducing it.

In 1994, at least 2,331 prisoners were executed in 37 countries worldwide, according to information received by Amnesty International. The true figure is probably much higher. Eighty-seven percent of all known executions were carried out in just three countries: China, Iran, and Nigeria. This year, at least 103 people have been executed in Saudi Arabia.

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