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Palestinian Authority: Amnesty International calls for halt to death penalty as four executed in Gaza

As the Palestinian Authority (PA) carried out its first executions since August 2002, Amnesty International today condemned the use of the death penalty by the PA, saying that it will in no way solve the problem of increasing crime and lawlessness in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and represents a step backwards for human rights in the Palestinian territories.

"The PA has the right and responsibility to bring to justice those suspected of criminal offences, but the death penalty is no solution," said Abdelsalam Sidahmed, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East Program. "There is no evidence to suggest that it effectively deters crime -- rather, it simply brutalizes society, causes anguish for the relatives of those who are executed, and reinforces a cycle of violence."

Four men were executed yesterday, three by hanging and one by firing squad. Three -- Wa'el Sha'ban al-Shoubaki, Salah Khalil Musallam, and 'Oda Muhammad Abu 'Azab -- were sentenced to death for murder in 1995 and 1996. The fourth, Muhammad Daoud al-Khawaja, was convicted of murder in 2000 after a trial before the notoriously unfair State Security Court, which has since been abolished.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas reportedly ordered the resumption of executions as a response to increased crime and lawlessness in areas of the Occupied Territories which fall under PA jurisdiction.

"To suggest that executions are a solution to increased lawlessness is a dangerous misconception," said Abdelsalam Sidahmed. "In order to fight crime effectively the PA must take concrete measures to ensure that its institutions, notably the security forces and the justice system, attain the requisite levels of competence and independence so that there is no need to resort to such a cruel and inhuman punishment, which constitutes the ultimate violation of the right to life."

Amnesty International called on President Abbas to impose a moratorium on executions. All prisoners sentenced to death by the State Security Court or by other courts in unfair trials should receive new trials that conform to international standards.

Since the establishment of the PA in 1994, Amnesty International has frequently expressed concern about trial proceedings that did not comply with international fair trial standards, arbitrary detentions and torture by PA security forces, and other abuses. The PA has also systematically afforded impunity to those responsible for killing Palestinians accused of collaborating with both Israeli intelligence services and security forces to assassinate other Palestinians.

"There is much that the PA can and should do to establish the rule of law and to end impunity for those responsible for killings and other abuses. Executions, including of people who were not granted a fair trial, is not the answer," said Abdelsalam Sidahmed.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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