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Malawi: Amnesty International welcomes suspension of executions and commutation of death sentences

Amnesty International today welcomed President Bakili Muluzi's statement that he will commute the death sentences of all prisoners currently sentenced to death and his pledge not to sign any orders of execution while President.

A high-level delegation from Amnesty International met His Excellency President Bakili Muluzi today to discuss police and judicial reforms to address public concerns about crimes. This discussion took place at Sanjika Place in the context of Amnesty International delegation's primary goal of urging the government to take steps to abolish the death penalty.

The Amnesty International delegation, led by Secretary General Pierre Sané, welcomed the President's action as an important first step in the abolition of the death penalty in Malawi. Speaking after the audience with President Muluzi, Mr Sané said that he was pleased with the positive response that Amnesty International had received during its visit. The delegation met with several government officials, including Ombudsman James Chirwa, solicitor General Steven Matenje and Mr Kampambe Nhkoma, Deputy Secretary to the President and Cabinet.

The delegation, which included international law professor Stephanie Farior of Pennsylvania state University in the United States and Amnesty International staff members Casey Kelso and Eliane Drakopoulos, also met with human rights non-governmental organisations, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Richard Banda, deputy police commissioners and several traditional authorities. The organization also met with leading members of the two opposition parties, who gave assurances that they will not oppose a moratorium on executions, vowing not to use the death penalty as a political football.

Amnesty International is unconditionally opposed to the death penalty, which it considers to be a human rights violation as serious as torture, political killings or "disappearance". The organization campaigns for the abolition of the death penalty worldwide, because it believes that:

- C the death penalty is not a deterrent to crime, but instead devaluates human life in the eyes of the public and promotes the use of violence by setting a bad example by the state;
- C the death penalty is an inhuman and degrading punishment, like torture, which causes intense physical pain and suffering at the moment of execution, and in the long process starting from the moment the death sentence is pronounced;

C the death penalty is often like a lottery of death in unfair trials, where judicial errors, inadequate legal defence and poor police investigation can often lead to the poor, the minorities and the mentally impaired being disproportionately executed.

C The death penalty, an irrevocable punishment, has been proven to have been used on innocent people.

Upon taking office in 1994, President Muluzi pardoned or commuted the death sentences of more than 100 prisoners. No executions have taken place in Malawi since 1992.

President Muluzi's recent initiatives are in keeping with the abolitionist trend in the region, which recently saw Angola, Mozambique, Mauritius and south Africa abolish the death penalty. Amnesty International hopes that other states in the region will follow Malawi's example.

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