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West Africa: Senegal abolishes the death penalty, who's next?

Amnesty International welcomes the adoption today by the Senegalese Parliament of the bill abolishing the death penalty. Senegal becomes the fourth member state of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to outlaw recourse to capital punishment (after Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau and Ivory Coast).

Under the lead of President Wade, the bill had been adopted unanimously by the government in July 2004. It was passed today with an overwhelming majority. Senegal has not carried out executions since 1967 but has continued to hand down death sentences, most recently in July 2004.

"Senegal should be a source of inspiration for all ECOWAS and other African countries which have not yet abolished the death penalty. Other African states should now follow the example of Senegal and respect the fundamental right to life," the organization said today.

Amnesty International also welcomes the important steps taken by Sierra Leone and Nigeria towards the abolition in the past months.

In October 2004, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) finally published its report. Among its key recommendations, the TRC asked the government: "to abolish the death penalty by repealing immediately all laws authorising the use of capital punishment". This recommendation is categorized as "imperative", that is, the government ought to implement it "without delay". The TRC further recommended the introduction of a moratorium on all executions pending a vote on abolition of the death penalty by Parliament. It also urged that any pending death sentences should be immediately commuted by the President.

In October 2004, the National Study Group on the Death Penalty - in charge of conducting a national debate in Nigeria - presented its report to the Federal Government of Nigeria. It called on the Federal Government to impose a moratorium on executions and commute to life imprisonment the sentences of all death row prisoners whose appeals have been concluded. President Olusegun Obasanjo, who is personally opposed to the death penalty, had launched a national debate on the issue in November 2003.

Amnesty International has been actively campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty in West Africa since October 2003. The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. It violates the right to life. It is irrevocable and can be inflicted on the innocent. It has never been shown to deter crime more effectively than other punishments.

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