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Death Penalty: 2,390 executions in 2008 worldwide, 72 per cent in China

Amnesty International today revealed that more people were executed in Asia than in any other part of the world in 2008 because China carried out more executions than the rest of the world put together. By contrast, in Europe only one country continues to use the death penalty: Belarus.

"The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. Beheadings, electrocutions, hangings, lethal injections, shootings and stonings have no place in the 21st century," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

The report *Death Sentences and Executions in 2008*, which provides a world overview on the death penalty, found that between January and December 2008 at least 2,390 people were executed in 25 countries around the world with at least 8,864 sentenced to death in 52 states.

Amnesty International also reports on countries that handed down death sentences after unfair trials, like Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen. The report addresses the discriminatory manner with which the death penalty was often applied in 2008, with a disproportionate number of sentences handed down to the poor, minorities and members of racial, ethnic and religious communities, in countries such as Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and USA. And the risk of executing the innocent continues, as highlighted by the four inmates released from death row in the USA on grounds of innocence.

Many death row inmates languish in harsh detention conditions and face psychological hardship. For example, in Japan inmates are typically notified of their hanging only on the morning of their execution and their families are informed only after the execution has taken place.

"Capital punishment is not just an act but a legalized process of physical and psychological terror that culminates in people being killed by the state. It must be brought to an end," said Irene Khan.

Most of the world is moving a step closer to the abolition of the death penalty, with only 25 out of the 59 countries that retain the death penalty reported to have actually executed in 2008. But Amnesty International warned that, in spite of this trend, death sentences continue to be handed out in their hundreds all over the world.

Progress was undermined, however, in 2008 by countries like St Kitts and Nevis which carried out the first execution in the Americas outside the USA since 2003 and Liberia where the death penalty was introduced for the crimes of robbery, terrorism and hijacking.

"The good news is that executions are only carried out by a small number of countries, which shows that we

are moving closer to a death-penalty free world,” said Irene Khan. “By contrast, the bad news is that hundreds of people continue to be sentenced to death and suffer in the many countries that have not yet formally abolished the death penalty.”

Regional summaries:

- Most of the executions in 2008 were carried out in Asia where 11 countries continue to practise the death penalty: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Japan, North Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Viet Nam. China alone accounted for almost three quarters of the world's executions, carrying out at least 1,718 executions - although the figure is believed to be much higher as statistics on death sentences and executions remain state secrets.
- The Middle East and North Africa was the region with the second highest number of executions (508). In Iran, stoning and hanging were among the cruel and inhumane methods used with at least 346 people put to death, including eight juvenile offenders. In Saudi Arabia, where execution is usually by public beheading and is, in some cases, followed by crucifixion, at least 102 people were executed.
- In the Americas, only the United States of America consistently executes, with 37 executions carried out in 2008 including more in Texas than in any other state. The release of four men from death row in the USA on grounds of innocence brings to more than 120 the number of such cases released since 1975. The only other country in the Americas to execute in 2008 was St Kitts and Nevis, the first Caribbean state to carry out an execution since 2003.
- Europe would be a ‘death penalty free zone’ if it were not for Belarus where the death penalty is shrouded in secrecy: execution by a gunshot to the back of the head and no official information given relatives about the date of the execution or where the body is buried. The former Soviet country carried out four executions in 2008 and remains the only country in Europe to retain the death penalty.
- Only two officially recorded executions were carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2008 but at least 362 people were sentenced to death. 2008 also saw a regressive development in Liberia where the death penalty was reintroduced for the crimes of robbery, terrorism and hijacking.

A copy of Amnesty International’s report Death Sentences and Executions in 2008 will be available from 24 March 2009 00:01 GMT on www.amnesty.org

Also available are a number of case studies of people who were executed during 2008 or who are currently on death row:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ACT50/006/2009/en>

The death penalty 2008 in numbers can be found here:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ACT50/008/2009/en>

Amnesty International’s Secretary General Irene Khan and other experts will be available for interviews in Arabic, English, French, Italian and Spanish.

A copy of Amnesty International's report, Ending executions in Europe: Towards abolition of the death penalty in Belarus, calling on the Belarusian authorities to abolish the death penalty will also be available from 24 March 2009 00:01 GMT on <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR49/001/2009/en>.

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