



IPS, the global news agency, brings you independent news and views on capital punishment. In this newsletter you will find in-depth reports by IPS correspondents from around the world and columns by experts, in addition to special sections for news from international NGOs and a review of the global media for a glimpse of what is happening on the ground. Join us in helping strengthen awareness about the abolition of death penalty – and encourage your friends and colleagues to subscribe to this free monthly newsletter.

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DEATH PENALTY: Two Kurdish Journalists on Iran's Death Row

By Kimia Sanati

TEHRAN - Kurdish human rights and political groups have launched an Internet campaign to save the lives of Adnan Hasanpoor and Abdolvahed (Hiva) Bootimar, two Iranian Kurdish journalists who were sentenced to death on Jul. 16 by a revolutionary tribunal in the Iranian Kurdish city of Marivan.

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Q&A: "Rational Debate on Capital Punishment Lacking"

Interview with Peter Hodgkinson

LONDON (IPS) - Peter Hodgkinson founded the world's first Centre for Capital Punishment Studies at the Westminster University Law School, London in 1992. The centre's aim is to inform the death penalty debate from an evidence-led perspective.

It also stages a number of practical projects addressing such issues as the alternatives to the death penalty and services for the families of murder victims as well as the condemned. This is the approach which needs to be developed further, he says in an interview with Julio Godoy, European correspondent of IPS.

Death penalty supporters and abolitionists still rely on much "mythology" and irrational argument. "Too much discussion takes place at the emotional and high moral ground level and not enough cerebrally," he says.

IPS: Over the past decade there has been an enormous increase in the number of countries abolishing the death penalty. You must see this as a tremendous achievement for the abolitionist movement?

PETER HODGKINSON: Removal of the death penalty must be welcomed. But one needs to examine in some detail the nature of the cause and effect relationship implicit in your question. I can recall a number of countries where replacement of the death penalty seemed unrelated to any specific 'abolitionist' campaign. It is important that the abolition industry rigorously scrutinises its strategies to determine the effect of its actions.

The Council of Europe is a case in point. The requirement for membership is suspension of executions, together with an undertaking to ratify the Sixth Protocol of the European Court of Human Rights within three years of accession. Countries were quite prepared to agree to this in order to join the club. As a death penalty 'expert' to the Council of Europe, my continuing regret is that the essential infrastructure changes for abolition and its aftermath were all too rarely resourced or put into practice. There continues to be an absence of rational, evidence-based debate about the alternative penal policy to capital punishment.

IPS: So despite the growing number of abolitionist countries, you are disappointed from this perspective?

PH: I believe that a holistic approach needs to be taken to the replacement of the death penalty. The issues I have just referred to should be addressed in this way. Adherence to capital punishment is symptomatic of states with questionable standards in the administration of justice. Removing the death penalty without addressing these fundamental flaws is an opportunity lost.

For example, I find it incomprehensible that abolition strategies give little or no thought to the replacement penalty after abolition. While progress to abolition is very welcomed, we need to keep in mind that more than 80 percent of the world's population live in countries where there is still provision for the death penalty.

Paradoxically, abolition of the death penalty itself rarely brings about the improvements that one would expect from such a radical step. Our

centre has always promoted a holistic approach in preparing for abolition and its aftermath. This approach requires that attention and resources are given to improving legal services, prison and police practices, crime victims' services, humane and proportionate alternatives to the death sentence and a political philosophy that avoids reinforcing the death penalty mythology.

IPS: But even with all this, isn't it going to be hard to convince the world's population to support abolition?

PH: It is important to acknowledge that the citizens of any country contemplating the replacement of capital punishment have every right to be nervous about the repercussions of such a policy. This is not because there is any evidence of the benefits of capital punishment but because they have been persuaded by politicians that the death penalty is the solution to serious violent crime. Our centre's response is to initiate what we call a 'public and elites information and reassurance' project. This strives to demonstrate to the public that removing the death penalty will not lead to civil society chaos.

IPS: You say penal policy is often left out of the debate on the death penalty. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is because it is so complicated?

PH: It is not inherently complicated. It is the duty and responsibility of governments to ensure that penal policy is informed by the data, not by populism. There is a wealth of evidence and experience about life and long-term imprisonment, for example. But one could be forgiven for thinking that policies are adopted at random and in the face of the evidence. Minimum prison sentence lengths as alternatives are plucked out of the sky. Most disturbing is the reliance on whole-of-life imprisonment.

There is some confusion in the term 'life imprisonment'. This can be made clearer if you consider it as time spent in prison and time under supervision, subject to recall to prison, for the rest of one's life. Neither the United Nations nor the Council of Europe guidelines on the management of life and long-term prisoners, concede the need for whole-of-life imprisonment, though they, and I, accept that there may be a few prisoners who may never be deemed safe to release back into the community. The Council of Europe guidelines should be compulsory reading for those shaping penal policy.

IPS: When should consideration be given to release a 'lifer' into the community?

PH: Subject to the circumstances in each individual case, judges should set the time to be served to meet the needs of deterrence and retribution. This is known as the tariff. Preparation for release back into the community should begin on day one of the sentence and actual release should be possible once the tariff has expired. Release, subject to rigorous support and supervision, should be based on assessment of risk of future offending and evidence of capacity to live a purposeful life in civil society. It should be subject to the possibility of being returned to prison should you violate your parole conditions.

The tariff serves as an encouragement and inducement to behave, to improve and address any problems identified as triggers to the offence. It also provides protection for the prison

staff who manage the subtle balance between rewards and punishment. Whole-of-life imprisonment provides neither hope nor purpose to prisoners. It also puts prison officers at potentially greater risk.

IPS: Resistance to abolishing the death penalty often comes from people concerned about the victims. Should the abolitionist movement be campaigning for more to be done for the victims?

PH: With few, but notable, exceptions -- I would single out the two U.S. organisations Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation and Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights -- the abolition industry has failed to address the issue of the families of homicide victims and the condemned. Victims have always been exploited as part of the 'law and order' platform of populist politicians. Many hollow promises are made on their behalf. An expressed 'concern' for victims often belies the fact that little or no services are being provided for them. Even when there is action this can take the form of exploiting the victim further by 'using' them as part of the prosecution process. The families of murder victims continue to be marginalised.

IPS: The UN General Assembly will soon be voting on a resolution calling for a universal moratorium on state executions. Of course, this will not be binding on the world community. But do you think a resolution passed with a significant majority might lead to more countries abolishing the death penalty and focus minds on the often-ignored issues you have mentioned?

PH: I would love it to have this effect and it would represent a symbolic move in the right direction. Those promoting such a resolution are confident of an increase in co-sponsors and securing a majority, a measure perhaps of the increasing consensus about the need to suspend executions and restrict reliance on the death penalty. I am less certain that it will change the behaviour of countries wedded to capital punishment. (END/2007)

DEATH PENALTY-US: Ohio Abolitionists See Light at End of Tunnel

By Adrienne Appel

BOSTON, Aug 30 (IPS) - Support is slowly growing for the abolition of the death penalty in the U.S. Midwestern state of Ohio, considered by rights activists as a key state because of its historic, strong stand for the death penalty.

"We are the state in the north that has killed the most people," Jeffrey Gamso, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, told IPS. "But there are signs that even in a state like Ohio things are on the verge of starting to turn around."

Gamso added: "Public support for the death penalty is down and death sentences are way down from a few years ago. Ohio is ripe for moving towards abolition." Juries were increasingly reluctant to agree to a prosecutor's call for a death sentence, reflecting the waning support for the ultimate sanction from the public at large.

As an indication of this, activists point to the swell of public opposition to the death penalty expressed last February. The new state governor, Tom Strickland, suspended three executions so he could review the cases. At the time, letters to the governor against the death penalty outnumbered those supporting it five-to-one, according to the Associated Press.

Currently 38 out of the 50 U.S. states still employ the death penalty but support in many states appears to be waning. New Jersey, Maryland and Connecticut may abolish the death penalty within a year or two, says David Elliot of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Ohio could follow some years later, Gamso and others in Ohio say.

Ohio reinstated the death penalty in 1974 and since 1999 has executed 26 inmates, including two so far this year. It has 185 people waiting on death row, according to the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. It has executed 369 people in its history.

The southern state of Texas leads the country in executions. Since 1976, when the death sentence was reinstated by the U.S. Supreme Court, Texas has executed 400 inmates, according to the Washington-based Death Penalty Information Centre.

The waning support for the death penalty in Ohio is explained by growing concern that innocent people may have been put to death and new information that death by lethal injection may cause suffering, activists say. There has also been mounting evidence of racial bias in handing down death sentences.

Since 1999, six people on Ohio's death row have been found to be innocent and been released from death row. This is a major reason for increased public doubt about the death penalty, Jim Tobin, an official with Ohioans to Stop Executions, told IPS.

Criminal defence lawyers are also on the offensive challenging the state's lethal injection method of execution, fighting a case-by-case struggle in the courts. They have succeeded in recently halting most executions in Ohio on these grounds, rights activists say.

But up to now politicians have lacked the political will to follow the example of several other U.S. states and order a moratorium on executions because of these concerns, Gamso and others said.

"The governor could if he wanted to. He has absolute power to do these things. (But) he has repeatedly said he would not," Gamso said.

Inertia has also been shown by other state institutions. "The state legislature and the state's supreme court could act but have so far chosen not to do so," Tobin said. "The make-up of the state courts is also not in our favour."

Since taking up office last January, the state's attorney general Marc Dann has failed to live up to expectations that he might act against the death penalty. In the months prior to his election, he said that he had significant doubts about the fairness of Ohio's death penalty system and wanted the state to conduct an analysis of it. He has so far failed to call for this investigation.

But three death penalty cases in the state continue to keep the issue in the news and are contributing to the continuing erosion of public confidence in the death sentence. They are also putting state officials under growing pressure to take a public stand.

The most publicised is that of Kenny Richey, on death row for 20 years. He was convicted of the arson murder of a two-year-old child. He was convicted on circumstantial evidence and he maintains he is innocent.

The U.S. Court of Appeals has twice ruled Richey's death sentence should be overturned because he received inadequate legal representation at his trial. In its devastatingly critical ruling on the conviction, the court said "the prosecution's case depended on a cast of witnesses whose lives revolved around drinking and partying and some of whom might have had their own motives for implicating Richey".

On Aug. 10, the court reaffirmed its first 2005 ruling and ordered the state court to retry or release him within 90 days.

A second case that has shaken public confidence in the death penalty is that of John Spirko, scheduled for execution in July but given a 120-day reprieve by Governor Strickland. This was Spirko's seventh reprieve because of doubts over his guilt. No physical evidence ties him to the crime, and charges against a co-defendant who linked him to the murder were dropped.

"Spirko's case is another clear sign that Ohio's system does not work," said Sister Alice Gerdeman in a statement. Gerdeman heads Ohioans to Stop Executions, which has gathered together a coalition of 118 organisations and cities, including Cincinnati, Dayton and Oberlin, campaigning for a state moratorium on executions. The coalition also wants an investigation into the operation of the state's capital punishment system.

Public concern over the fairness of the death penalty system has also been voiced over the case of Jason Getsy, a convicted killer-for-hire, who was 19 years old when he committed the crime in 1995. He was given a death sentence, while the man who orchestrated the murder was not.

A federal court recently denied Getsy's appeal. But six of the 14 judges dissented, saying Getsy's sentence was not fair. His case will be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, his lawyer, Michael Benza, told IPS.

Judge Boyce Martin, delivering his dissenting judgement, said the case showed that the death penalty was "arbitrary, biased, and so fundamentally flawed at its very core that it is beyond repair".

Groups campaigning against the death penalty in the state believe they will receive wide public support when they hold a rally and lobby day at the state's legislature on Sep. 26.

The public is tiring of the "idea that we can kill our way out of our problems", Tobin, one of the rights activists who will be present on that day, said. (END/2007)

MALAYSIA-DEATH PENALTY: Nine Years on Death Row, Denied Appeal **By Baradan Kuppasamy**

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 26 (IPS) - "Hang me or release me but don't leave me to suffer a slow death," is the cry of anguish from Baha Jambol, 45, who has been suspended helplessly here on death-row for nine long years, unable to appeal a death sentence.

Jambol's desperate predicament is not unique. It is caused by a serious flaw in Malaysian criminal justice system.

Jambol was sentenced to death in April 1998 for being in possession of 50 kg of cannabis. He is unable to appeal because the trial judge has failed to put pen to paper and give the grounds sentencing him to 'death by hanging'.

"Without a written judgement we can't appeal," Karpal Singh, Jambol's lawyer and prominent human rights campaigner, told IPS.

Jambol, a driver, was at the wheel of a car when cannabis was found inside. But the car owner, who was with him at the time, was acquitted.

The scandal of the ink-shy judge, loath to put his judgements on paper, has shocked the nation and led to renewed demands for a swift end to the death penalty.

"This case is a severe travesty of justice," said Singh. "Jambol has been languishing on death row for nine years... what can be crueller than this? I urge the government to immediately abolish the death penalty and end the misery of people on death row."

Like Jambol, dozens of others wait in great misery in the country's overcrowded jails unable to appeal their death sentences because trial judges have skipped their duty of spelling out their judgements on paper.

Aziz Sharif, 28, was sentenced to death in 2001 for murdering his girlfriend, a conviction that his lawyer Harbahjan Singh says is deeply flawed. Six years on, Singh is still blocked from filing an appeal because there is no written judgement.

Aziz is suffering severe mental torture while waiting to know his fate, his family, poor rice farmers from the southern state of Negri Sembilan, told the newspaper The New Straits Times earlier this month.

They have appealed to the court numerous times to get the judge to write his judgment but without success.

"I wrote five letters to the court over the matter and sadly they did not have the decency to reply to any of the letters," Singh told the paper.

The same predicament is currently being endured by Haszaidi Hasan, also sentenced to death for drug trafficking in 2001.

Opposition politicians and rights activists are now pressing for action against Malaysia's indolent judges.

"Their lackadaisical attitude has hamstrung the administration of justice to people who need it the most," opposition lawmaker Kulasegaran Murugesan told IPS.

"If the judges had done their basic duties the convicted persons could have speedily filed their appeals and probably been acquitted. A long delay is a mark of a poor criminal justice system," he said, urging the government to set free death-row inmates caught in such a tragic predicament.

He added: "A more lasting and more humane solution is to abolish the death penalty."

The cases have also been taken up by the rights organisation Malaysians Against the Death Penalty. "Prisoners facing capital punishment are under severe pressure if their appeals are delayed," Charles Hector, the organisation's co-director and lawyer, told IPS.

"Judges should understand the tremendous pressure the death penalty generates... delaying their right to appeal is an act of utmost cruelty. Family members are also left emotionally drained by the uncertainties and the long meaningless delays. It is an intolerable form of torture."

Hector added: "This tragic delay is another reason to review the death penalty. We demand an immediate moratorium on all executions pending the abolition of the death penalty in Malaysia."

Amnesty International has also expressed shock at the long inordinate delays and the resulting mental torture death row inmates suffer. There should be an immediate moratorium on all further executions, the organisation agrees.

The Malaysian Bar Association has taken up the scandal, calling on all the country's lawyers to report back cases where clients are enduring a "slow death" because of long-delayed or non-existent written judgements.

The association plans to present Malaysia's Chief Justice Ahmad Fairuz Halim with a list of serious cases. The hope is the offending judges will be penalised, a sanction that might finally end the torment of many dozens like Jambol and Aziz left dangling on death-row.

Malaysia imposes the death penalty for a raft of offences, from drug trafficking (15 grams of heroin and 200 grams of cannabis) to poisoning the water supply. Mandatory death penalties are also given for murder, possession of firearms, treason.

Over a thousand persons have been executed since independence in 1957 and some 300 are currently awaiting execution on death row, many of them Acehnese from Indonesia convicted of trafficking cannabis. (END/2007)

RIGHTS-KYRGYZSTAN: Abolition Campaigners Press On By Kuban Abdymen

BISHKEK, Aug 16 (IPS) - The final striking out of all death sentences from Kyrgyzstan's criminal code has been welcomed by rights activists here -- but many are critical of the limitations of this measure and are now urging more reforms to accompany the abolition of the death penalty.

On Jun. 27, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed into force a "humanised" criminal code. This replaced the maximum sanction of execution by firing squad with 30 years' life imprisonment.

The amendments bring the criminal code in line with the last December 2006 constitution. This had specifically banned all taking of life, making Kyrgyzstan the second country in the five nation Central Asian region to abolish the death penalty.

"Many judges will now breathe easier. They used to pass death sentences with reluctance and the hope they would be softened during the appeal process," Ulugbek Azimov, a legal expert with the

Independent Human Rights Organisation and former judge, told IPS. "The new criminal code amendments mean all 174 death row prisoners will now have their sentences reviewed by the courts which originally sentenced them."

Dinara Sayakova, manager of the Independent Human Rights Organisation, added: "This is an essential requirement for a society to call itself civilised." Abolition and these criminal code changes meant that the focus would now be on reforming killers and rapists.

Sayakova, a doctor who once worked as a criminal pathologist, said that she was one of those who had been won over by the arguments of the abolitionists.

But some rights activists are critical of the limitations of the criminal code amendments.

The criminal code allows an eight-month period for a review of the existing 174 death sentences, Azimov said. "It is likely there will be a new law to regulate this," he added.

But the short period and uncertainty over what kind of review will be permitted has raised concerns among rights activists.

The possibility of past judicial mistakes was higher in Kyrgyzstan than in a developed country, Nurbolot Kurmanov, head of the Bishkek city department of justice, told IPS, suggesting he supported a thorough review of all past death penalty cases.

Questions have been raised over the social background of most of the 174 former death row inmates. Not one of them came from well-off Kyrgyz families, according to statistics issued by the Bureau of Human Rights, an independent body supported by U.S. rights organisations.

Activists here are pressing for Kyrgyzstan's life sentence to be reduced to 20 years. The new 30 years' in prison before parole is especially harsh because of the conditions in Kyrgyzstan's prisons, they argue. It is also largely out of step with international practice.

Officials have promised improvements to prison conditions for the new category of lifers. Deputy minister for justice, Sergey Zubov has pledged renovations will be made to one of the sections in the Bishkek prison where they are being held. But activists are sceptical that this will be possible without outside help.

"It is interesting that many prisoners have not welcomed the abolition of the death penalty," Nargiza Aky, head of the Kyrgyz Ombudsman organisation, told IPS. "They are saying that life imprisonment is just not a humane approach. If the conditions in the prisons approached international standards, they would speak differently."

Lack of money for the prison system meant all prisoners suffered from a poor diet, she said, adding: "They are receiving less than the specified daily ration of 50-60 grams of meat. Scoop a ladle into the evening soup and you will find only liquid."

One respected, knowledgeable source has reported to IPS that corruption and theft of food by suppliers and prison staff are also among the reasons for the poor diet.

Independent investigations by IPS have confirmed reports of

overcrowding, tuberculosis and lack of medical care for former death row inmates. Most suffered mental illness but received no psychiatric help.

Penal Reform International has called on the authorities throughout the region to provide minimum standards of treatment for the prisoners and introduce a system of public, independent monitoring of penal conditions.

Kyrgyzstan activists are now also pressing parliament to ratify the U.N.'s second optional protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This aims at abolishing the death penalty. It would be an added confirmation of the country's commitment to abolition, they say.

"It is not difficult to change a constitution. This is the reason we need to ratify this protocol," said Sayakova, clearly alluding to the two new constitutions which were passed within the space of two months last year.

An attempt to get the parliament to ratify the protocol failed last year. But activists hope there will be a second opportunity soon.

Sixty-one nations have ratified the protocol, including the Central Asian state of Turkmenistan. (END/2007)

RIGHTS-THAILAND: Thaksin May Yet Pay for Bloody 'War-on-Drugs' By Marwaan Macan-Markar

BANGKOK, Aug 16 (IPS) - While arrest warrants are being readied for self-exiled, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra on corruption charges, human rights advocates are keener to see him booked for a murderous campaign he led against drug peddlers four years ago.

On Tuesday, Thailand's Supreme Court approved warrants issued by prosecution to arrest Shinawatra and his wife Pojaman on charges of corruption in controversial land deals in Bangkok. A millionaire in his own right, Thaksin who lives in Britain was in the news recently for his purchase of the prestigious Manchester City premier league football club.

A statement issued by a spokesman for Thaksin attributed political motives on the part of the military government that ousted him from power last September, and suggested that moves to have him arrested or extradited have to do with the "referendum on the constitution taking place later this week".

As per the court order, Thaksin and Pojaman have until Sep. 25 to surrender to police, after which date proceedings could be initiated to have them extradited from Britain. On Thursday, Thaksin and his wife were placed on an immigration blacklist that makes them liable to immediate arrest on entry into Thailand.

Thaksin faces several corruption charges and, if convicted, he may no longer be "fit and proper" to own Manchester City and the English Premier League may well withdraw certification to that effect that it has granted him.

Among those opposing the mandatory certification for new owners of first-division football clubs in Britain is the New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW). In a recent letter written to Richard Scudamore,

chief executive of the Premier League, HRW drew attention to Thaksin's brutal 'war on drugs'.

In 2003 Thaksin gave the green light to the police and other authorities to show no mercy in cracking down on the narcotics trade in the country, in particular the networks supplying methamphetamines. In its letter, HRW recalled lines Thaksin had delivered to justify the blood-bath. "Because drug traders are ruthless to our children, so being ruthless back to them is not a bad thing," Thaksin had said. "It may be necessary to have casualties...If there are deaths among traders, it's normal," he had added.

The consequences of those words became disturbingly clear early on in the anti-drug drive. During the first three months of that 'war,' which began in February that year, over 2,275 people were killed. Other deaths followed as the campaign was extended till the end of 2003.

Among those who lost a relative was Malai Khamjarsai. Her sister and brother-in-law were shot to death on the evening of May 19, 2003, at a security checkpoint near the city of Mae Sot, close to the Thai-Burma border. "Both of them were innocent; they were clean; they only earned money through their transport business," the 40-year-old Malai told IPS this week. "The police and the government did little to investigate at that time."

The deaths also resulted in Malai having to care for the two children orphaned due to the deaths of her sister Umpaipan Roopongpraserd, who was 33 years at the time, and her husband, Pongtep who was 44. "They are both boys, 12 and 16 years," she says. "We are still wanting to know why their mother and father were killed."

One person who may help is Kanit Na Nakorn, a respected former Thai attorney general, who has been appointed by the post-coup military government to head a committee tasked with uncovering the grisly details related to the 'war on drugs.' The delay in such an official inquiry over four years after the murder spree is due to the cold response by the Thaksin administration to stall any investigations into the thousands of extra-judicial killings.

"These murders were committed by the police; the policemen were the killers. Yet the government of Thaksin did not bother to conduct any inquiries," Somchai Homlaor, a human rights lawyer, told IPS. "Even complaints by the National Human Rights Commission were ignored. The commissioners submitted many reports on the 'war on drugs' to the Thaksin government and also to the United Nations."

What troubles Sunai Phasuk, the Thai researcher for HRW, is the line of argument Thaksin and his supporters are presently using to deflect the charges about his role during the bloody crackdown. "Thaksin is asking for fair treatment and that he be considered innocent until proved guilty," says Sunai. "But when he was in power, he never gave his victims a similar chance to prove themselves in court. He ordered them to be killed."

The inquiry headed by the former Thai attorney general will help to shed light on another reality, too, Sunai explained during an interview. "There is a need to change the perception in England about who the majority of those killed were. The majority was innocent people, not drug traffickers." (END/2007)

DEATH PENALTY-RWANDA: Abolition Spurs Quest for Justice By Aimable Twahirwa

KIGALI, Aug 7 (IPS) - Rwanda has moved swiftly to capitalise on the international approval it received for its recent abolition of the death penalty, and signalled that it will now actively seek the extradition of suspects in the 1994 genocide known to be hiding out abroad and evading justice.

"We have already signed extradition agreements with many countries in Africa, Europe and in North America. We are hoping that those countries will co-operate to bring to trial all genocide suspects, or to extradite their cases before Rwandan justice," Justice Minister Tharcisse Karugarama said here Aug. 2. "If there are other nations which could help we would praise this," Karugarama told IPS earlier.

Karugarama's statement, coming just a week after the formal abolition of the death penalty on Jul. 25, will go some way to appease genocide victims who are unhappy that perpetrators of the "ultimate crime" will now escape death by firing squad.

Some 44,204 Rwandans accused of participating in the genocide are living abroad, according to an institutional judicial report published here in May.

The need for Rwanda to continue the quest for justice was underlined by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, who issued one of the first and warmest tributes for Rwanda's decision to abolish the death penalty. The thirst for justice remained "far from quenched", she acknowledged, adding: "With the promulgation of the law banning the death penalty, Rwanda simultaneously takes an important step forward in ensuring respect for the right to life and makes further progress in bringing to justice those responsible for the heinous crimes of the 1994 genocide."

For most countries, the abolition of the death penalty in Rwanda was a prerequisite for allowing extradition of genocide suspects to the Central African nation. Rwanda's last executions of those convicted for their role in the genocide, in which more than 800,000 minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered by Hutu extremists, took place in 1998. Twenty-two persons found guilty of helping to plan the killings were publicly shot.

Since then all others convicted of participating in the genocide have been sitting on death row awaiting execution. Death penalty abolition means they -- and people sentenced to death for other crimes -- will now be spared and serve out life imprisonment terms. In all, about 650 people will avoid capital punishment.

In 1996 the U.N. Security Council set up the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to "contribute to the process of national reconciliation" and try some of the most serious cases of genocide. The tribunal, which will have completed trials of some 70 people by the end of next year, will now be able to wind up its work and transfer 17 cases to the Rwandan justice system, ICTR prosecutor Hassan Babacar Jallow confirmed to IPS in Rwanda's capital -- Kigali.

Eighteen people indicted by the tribunal are still on the run.

Rwanda can expect police forces around the globe to co-operate in tracking down these and other suspects. "It is our duty as police officers to do everything in our power to identify and apprehend these fugitives who are wanted in connection with such serious crimes," the president of Interpol, Jackie Selebi, said at its 19th African Regional Conference in Tanzania last month. Interpol has 186 member countries.

Rwandan community groups abroad are also likely to campaign vigorously for extradition proceedings to be brought against genocide suspects in their midst.

Days after the news of abolition, the Rwandan community in Canada led the way by calling for the extradition of Leon Mugesera, a former Hutu extremist who had been allowed to stay in Canada while Rwanda's death penalty was in place.

Despite the official assurances that Rwanda will now seek a return of these people, many of those who survived the genocide were critical of the death penalty ban when interviewed by IPS.

"This is only going to encourage those bent on our extermination," said Gisele Dusabe. "This is a humiliation. I lost my entire family and up to today have received no compensation."

But Paul Kazoba, a Tutsi who fled to Uganda, expressed a different view. "We need to rebuild our nation," he said. "True reconciliation is only possible if one refrains from retaliatory killing."

A Hutu genocide participant who has confessed before the community 'Gacaca' courts, established to speed up the administration of justice, welcomed the ban on capital punishment. "We deeply regret what we have done. The abolition of the death penalty will surely facilitate reconciliation."

The Gacaca courts were first set up in 2001, at a time when more than 100,000 Rwandans were waiting in jails to be tried for crimes connected with the genocide. They have settled many cases after accepting expressions of contrition, and reparations. The state judicial system has continued to hear the cases of those accused of planning and organising the genocide.

Thousands of Rwandans are still awaiting trial for genocide-related crimes. Amnesty International has expressed concern over the conditions they are held in. "We welcome this step taken by the Rwandan government. It is a good move for the Great Lakes region as it is the first country there to abolish the death penalty. But we want to raise concern about the appalling and inhumane prison conditions in Rwanda," said Central Africa researcher Arnaud Royer. (END/2007)

DEATH PENALTY: Two Kurdish Journalists on Iran's Death Row By Kimia Sanati

TEHRAN, Aug 1 (IPS) - Kurdish human rights and political groups have launched an Internet campaign to save the lives of Adnan Hasanpoor and Abdolvahed (Hiva) Bootimar, two Iranian Kurdish journalists who were sentenced to death on Jul. 16 by a revolutionary tribunal in the Iranian Kurdish city of Marivan.

Hasanpoor was found guilty of 'moharebe' (taking up arms against the Islamic state) and espionage. The charge of espionage rested on telephone interviews he gave to the foreign media, including the Voice of America, his lawyer was quoted as saying by the Iranian Labour News Agency.

Bootimar was also tried on the charge of moharebe, fellow Kurdish journalist Khosrow Kurdpoor told IPS. Kurdpoor, who runs the Mukrian News website, was quoting the lawyer who represented the two journalists.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF - Reporters sans frontières), the international press freedom watchdog, has voiced deep concern over the sentences of the two journalists and appealed to the international community to ask Iran to reverse its decision and refrain from executing the two men "who only exercised their right to inform their fellow citizens".

Iran is on its way to becoming one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists, RSF said.

"We know nothing about the trial procedures but we know they held Hiva (Bootimar) and Adnan (Hasanpoor) in jail for several months before their trials. Hiva, who is an environmentalist and one of the founders of the Marivan's Sabzchiya environment protection society, has apparently been tried on the 'charge of affiliation to a political group that has armed struggle in its charter'," a Kurdish human rights activist, who requested anonymity, told IPS.

"He is not known to have had any such connections himself, but there are rumours that he is being held as hostage to make his brother, who has fled the country, return," said the activist.

Asu, the Kurdish language weekly to which Hasanpoor and Bootimar contributed, was banned on Aug. 4, 2005, forcing it to halt its reporting of the riots that broke out in Mahabad, western Iran, and which spread to other Kurdish-populated towns and villages of western Iran.

The unrest that lasted for over a month in the Kurdish areas was provoked by the death of Shwane Qaderi, a 25-year-old who was shot by the police on the streets of Mahabad. His body was then tied to a military vehicle and dragged through the streets of the city.

Pictures of Qaderi's tortured body could be seen on the Internet and angry crowds in Kurdish towns and villages attacked government offices and banks. The riots and demonstrations left scores of people dead and injured. Hundreds were arrested.

On Jul. 13, Abdolsamad Nasiri, 17, was beaten to death by security agents in Mahabad, Kurdistan Media, the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan's publication centre, reported.

"The circumstances of the youth's death are not clear but the atmosphere in the city that day had been very tense and many shops had closed to commemorate the anniversary of the assassination of Abdolrahman Qasemlou, leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, in 1989 in Vienna," the Kurdish activist told IPS.

The Iranian government, accused of orchestrating the assassination by Kurdish parties and groups, has always denied any connection with the killing of the expatriate Kurdish leader.

The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan is the oldest Kurdish political party. Last month, on the anniversary of the assassination of its leader, the party called on the people in Kurdish cities to turn off their lights for three minutes in protest.

On the same day, spontaneous rallies in a number of Kurdish cities were reported by Kurdish news websites. Shops were also reported closed as a sign of protest for what the Kurds say is huge discrimination against them in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iranian Kurds, who had largely been submissive before the Islamic Revolution of 1978, rose up against the new regime along with some other ethnic minorities, demanding the right to self-determination. After several years of armed struggle, various Kurdish groups, most of them with leftist leanings, were brought under control.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the establishment of the Kurdish Authority in northern Iraq, Iranian Kurds have once again been pursuing their demands with greater vigour. But armed struggle is no longer on the agenda of many of the groups who fought the central government two decades ago. Many say they are now seeking federalism.

Only the PJAK (Partiya Jiyana Azad Kurdistane or Party for Free Life of Kurdistan), a small guerrilla group, still carries out armed operations against the government forces. It is said to be affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

The PJAK has bases in Turkey and northern Iraq and the Iranian government occasionally launches cross-border raids against its bases. The guerrillas downed an Iranian Revolutionary Guards helicopter in western Iran in March this year, killing two top brass revolutionary guards and seven other military staff.

"In recent years the people in Kurdish populated areas have increasingly chosen civil and peaceful methods over violence in their struggle. For example, in protest against the death sentence passed on Adnan Hasanpoor, the market and shops were closed in Marivan," Kurdpoor told IPS.

Three other Kurdish journalists and human rights activists, Aku Kordnasab, Ejlal Qavami and Mohammad Sadiq Kaboudvand, arrested during the past month, and Kaveh Javanmard, arrested in May and sentenced to two years in prison, are presently held in prison, Kurdpoor said.

In the absence of a free press, news from the Kurdish-populated areas and reports of the sentences passed on the two journalists have only been carried on Kurdish and opposition news sites.

The Iranian press is very strictly censored. Many media organizations resort to self-censorship to avoid being banned by the government. The Iranian Labour News Agency, the only major news agency not under government control, which consistently reported on human rights related issues, was recently banned.

(All parties named in the article are illegal and banned in Iran.)
(END/2007)

News from International NGOs

DEATH PENALTY. HANDS OFF CAIN PRESENT 2007 REPORT

Only a few weeks ahead of the presentation of a resolution on the Universal Moratorium on Capital Punishment at the UN General Assembly by the European Union, an initiative that was inspired by Italy, Hands Off Cain released on August 30 its 2007 Report on Capital Punishment in the world, and the picture it paints is chilling.

Notwithstanding protests and humanitarian initiatives, many countries of the world still execute children. And in 2006 the number of countries that employ capital punishment increased from 24 in 2005 to 27. In 2006, there were at least 5,628 executions as compared with 5,494 in 2005. Capital punishment still exists in many Islamic regimes, in some democracies, and even in a European country (Belarus).

Among the 51 countries that still employ capital punishment, China, Iran and Pakistan take the record for executions: at least 5000, 215 and 82 respectively. In 2006 in Iran, seven minors were executed. The United States have put to death 53 people, slightly less than the year before. Between June 30th, 2005, and June 30th, 2006, five executions took place in Belarus. However the surprise comes from Africa, the continent of tribal struggles and uncontrollable genocides. While it is true that there were 80 documented executions in 2006, a sharp increase on the 19 of 2005, it is also true that numerous countries are in favour of the resolution on capital punishment, as Prime Minister Romano Prodi revealed in the introduction of the Hands Off Cain Report.

The Prime Minister describes the commitment in Africa as extraordinary, citing that South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Senegal, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda (whose people have recently witnessed the most serious violations of international human rights) have joined our global campaign. Confirming this is the recognition given to Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda, with the prize of 'Abolitionist of the Year 2007'. It was awarded by Hands Off Cain as an acknowledgement to the person who, more than anyone else, committed themselves to the moratorium on capital punishment and the abolition of the death penalty. Kagame is also the author of the Report's preface, in which he notes that 'Rwandans have defeated the leadership responsible for the genocide (the Hutu), the State and the culture of impunity'.

According to Hands Off Cain, 'the abolition of the death penalty and the support of the campaign for the Universal Moratorium on capital punishment are acts of extraordinary symbolic value. Rwanda has symbolically demonstrated to the world that it is possible to break the absurd cycle of revenge, and that justice and legality aren't achieved with capital punishment.'

HANDS OFF CAIN TO HONOUR KAGAME ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Hands Off Cain awarded on August 30 the Rwandan President Paul Kagame with the "The Abolitionist of the Year 2007" Award for scrapping capital punishment from the criminal laws of the country, RNA reports. The prize was awarded through Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi. The occasion coincided with the release of the annual 2007 "The Death Penalty Worldwide" report of the organisation that has been prefaced by President Kagame. Romano Prodi wrote the introduction of the report. "The abolition of the death penalty and the adherence to the campaign for a universal moratorium on capital punishment are acts of remarkable symbolic value, through which Rwanda has emblematically shown the world the possibility of an end to the absurd cycle of vendetta and that justice and lawfulness cannot be achieved with capital punishment", the President said in a statement. Last year, the ruling Rwanda Patriotic Front party led by Mr. Kagame campaigned to abolish the death penalty in Rwanda. Despite bitter criticism of the plan by Genocide survivors, the Rwanda Senate put the final stamp to the debate by adopting the change in June.

BRAZIL: REPORT ON PAST ATROCITIES A KEY STEP FORWARD

A government report on hundreds of political killings and "disappearances" committed under Brazil's military regime is an important step toward addressing years of official impunity, Human Rights Watch said on August 31. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva presented the report on Wednesday (August 29) at a ceremony with victims' relatives in Brasilia. The government's 500-page report, titled "The Right to Memory and Truth," is the result of an 11-year investigation by the national Commission on Political Deaths and Disappearances, which was established in 1995, during the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, to determine the fate of government opponents who were killed or "disappeared" by state security forces between 1961 and 1988.

"Brazil has finally released a comprehensive account of the brutal methods that its military regime used to dispose of political opponents," said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch. "Yet significant aspects of this dark history still need to be clarified."

According to the report, the Brazilian armed forces have never opened key archives from the period of military rule (1964-1985). As a result, the commission was unable to clarify important aspects of these crimes, including the whereabouts of the majority of the "disappeared" victims.

The commission analyzed reparation claims by victims' families, investigated the circumstances of each of the alleged deaths and disappearances. Reparations were granted in 357 cases. Unlike other countries that endured abusive military regimes, such as Argentina and Chile, Brazil has never prosecuted those responsible for past atrocities. An amnesty law passed in 1979 pardoned both government agents and members of armed political groups who had committed abuses. "The Brazilian government has made real progress in establishing the truth and providing reparations to victims' families," said Vivanco. "What it still needs to provide is justice by prosecuting those responsible for these heinous crimes."

MORE THAN 2,000 KILLED IN ATTACKS BY SEPARATIST GROUPS IN THAILAND'S SOUTH

In their efforts to establish an independent state in Thailand's southern border provinces, separatist groups are killing and mutilating civilians and attacking schools, community clinics, and Buddhist temples, Human Rights Watch said in a new report released August 28. The 104-page report, "No One is Safe: Insurgent Attacks on Civilians in Thailand's Southern Border Provinces," details human rights abuses and violence committed against civilians by separatist militants in the predominantly ethnic Malay Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla from January 2004 to July 2007. The report is based on interviews with eyewitnesses, families of the victims, academics, journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and government officials.

Moreover, the report includes firsthand accounts from members and militants of separatist groups in which they discuss their motivations and attempted justifications for the attacks. "After decades of low-intensity insurgency, Thailand's southern region is becoming the scene of a brutal armed conflict," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "Separatist militants are intentionally targeting both Buddhist and Muslim civilians in shootings, bombings and machete attacks."

Village-based militants called Pejuang Kemerdekaan Patani (Patani Freedom Fighters) in the loose network of BRN-Coordinate (National Revolution Front-Coordinate) have now emerged as the backbone of the new generation of separatist militants. Increasingly, they claim that the southern border provinces are not the land of Buddhist Thais, but a religious "conflict zone" which must be divided between ethnic Malay Muslims and "infidels." The separatists seek to forcibly liberate Patani Darulsalam (Islamic Land of Patani), from what they call a Buddhist Thai occupation.

DEATH PENALTY ABOLITION IN RWANDA SIGNIFICANT

Rwanda has become the latest country to abolish the death penalty, accelerating the worldwide trend towards ending capital punishment, said Amnesty International. It is the first country in Africa's Great Lakes region to call a halt to executions and the 100th country worldwide to abolish the death penalty in law. Another 30 countries are abolitionist in practice. Fourteen countries in Africa, including Rwanda, are now abolitionist for all crimes and a further 18 are abolitionist in practice. It is hoped that Rwanda's move will spark a pattern towards abolishing the death penalty in Central Africa. There are encouraging signs from Burundi, where a revised version of the Penal Code, currently pending promulgation, has excluded the death penalty as punishment for all crimes.

The last death sentences were imposed in Rwanda in 2003. The last executions took place in 1998, when 22 people found guilty of genocide-related crimes were executed. Rwanda currently holds approximately 600 prisoners on death row, whose sentences are being commuted following this legislation. The continued existence of the death penalty constituted one of the main obstacles preventing the transfer of detainees held by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), or indicted genocide suspects living abroad, to Rwanda's national jurisdiction.

Other obstacles have been the capability of the Rwandan justice system to provide fair trials as well as additional concerns regarding its independence, impartiality and transparency. The abolition of the death penalty is a step forward. Amnesty International now calls on the Rwandan government to co-sponsor the resolution on a global moratorium on executions that will be introduced at the United Nations General Assembly this October, and to encourage other countries in the region to support the resolution.

KYRGYZSTAN: CASES OF DEATH UNDER TORTURE MOUNTING IN THE CITY OF NARYN

Vienna, Bishkek, 22 August 2007. The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), the Human Rights Center "Kylm Shamy" of Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights (KCHR) are concerned about the use of torture by police agents in the city of Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, a statement on August 21 said. Human rights defenders in the city have registered several proven incidences of torture by law enforcement officers. In all these cases the victims of torture died.

While in one case criminal investigations were initiated, on August 13, the two police officers charged with torture were acquitted. Most tragically, on the same day another person was reportedly beaten to death by a police officer. Alykbek Sakeev (1959 – 2007), was arrested by two officers of GOVD (city department of the Ministry of Interior), Chyngyz Kerimkulov and Taalajbek Chypaev, on suspicion of cattle theft on 20 November 2006. After several hours, he was delivered to the emergency room of the casualty hospital in Naryn where he died without regaining consciousness. On November 25 last year, a criminal case was initiated against the two law enforcement officers for torture under articles 305 and 305-1, but in three days they were released after signing a statement that they would not leave the state.

In February 2007, Sakeev's relatives withdrew their appeal after receiving 200,000 Soms from the GOVD officers, and the Naryn city prosecutor's office tried to close the case. Under pressure from human rights defenders, the case was reinitiated. On August 13, the two police officers were acquitted. Several days before the court decision, human rights defender A. Abdurasulova, who monitored the trial, was attacked in the court hall by unknown women. Also on August 13, the court started the trial to determine the cause of death of Bektemir Akunov, who reportedly hanged himself by his own shirt in the pre-detention cell in GOVD department of the Naryn city on 14 April 2007. The unsettled circumstances surrounding his death have attracted public attention in Kyrgyzstan after an independent commission headed by A. Abdurasulova had concluded that Akunov did not commit suicide.

WORLD PRESS REVIEW – August 2007

MALTA AGREES TO SIGN DEATH PENALTY'S SUSPENSION

Malta is willing to sign the moratorium proposal of the death penalty, the Malta Media on internet reported August 27. This results from bilateral talks between the Italian Justice Minister Clemente Mastella and Minister for Justice and Home Affairs Dr Tonio Borg on Saturday (August 25). In a statement, the Italian Ministry for Justice said that Justice Minister Mastella has put forward the issue of the capital punishment abolition in the world, proposing that the European Union should take in charge of this delicate question, during a European Council of Minister for Justice's meeting held in Dresden, Germany. "Malta's adherence is an important sign of the common sensibility which is gaining support in various countries," the Italian Justice Minister emphasised. "The capital punishment is not considered in the Maltese law, neither in Italy. My aspiration is that capital punishment is abolished in all the world. Life is a gift and no one has the right to elect himself as supreme justice to decide who lives or not." Mastella concluded.

DEATH PENALTY FOR SIX PERSONS IN INDIA

The Hindu newspaper reported August 20: The Patna Civil Court on Saturday awarded capital punishment to six persons found guilty of kidnapping and murdering a minor in 2004. Additional District Judge R.P. Sharma upheld the charges against the accused. Sumit was kidnapped on September 21, 2004 and murdered. A ransom of Rs. 3 lakh was demanded from his parents. Those sentenced are Neeraj Kumar, Ravi Rai, Santosh Kumar, Gorakh Singh, Sunny Kumar and Rabindra Kumar.

SERIAL KILLER SPARED DEATH PENALTY

The Maryland Gazette reported on August 18: Alexander Wayne Watson Jr. owes his life to the families of his victims. County prosecutors this week agreed to not seek the death penalty for the serial killer - who's already serving life in prison without parole for a 1994 murder - after he pleaded guilty to the long-unsolved murders of three county women from 1986 to 1993 and met face-to-face with his victims' families.

"None of us feel we have accomplished anything with this plea," said Jennifer Scott, the driving force behind the plea and daughter of one of the victims. "We have not gotten a violent offender off of the streets of this county. All that has been done today is that three women's files can finally be closed, their boxes put away for good, after far too many years." Watson was charged in 2004 with the Oct. 8, 1986, murder of Boontem Anderson, 33, of Gambrills; the May 23, 1988, rape and murder of Elaine Buchanan Shereika, 37, of Gambrills; and the Jan. 15, 1993, killing of Lisa Haenel, 14, of Glen Burnie. DNA evidence entered into a state database in 2003 linked him to the crimes.

INNOCENT MAN SENTENCED TO DEATH UNDER CRUEL TEXAS LAW

The Brooklyn Rail reported on August 14: Kenneth Foster's time is running out. On Tuesday, August 7, in a six-to-three decision, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals denied his final writ of habeas corpus, giving the legal green light for his execution. Foster, who is

scheduled to die by lethal injection on August 30, is now at the mercy of the merciless Board of Pardons and Paroles. The odds are bad. Five out of seven board members must recommend clemency before Governor Rick Perry will consider it -- and in a state that has executed nearly 400 people in thirty years, clemency has only been granted twice. But Foster's supporters, who are spearheading a letter-writing campaign to the board and governor, are relying on one particularly salient detail to move their minds, if not their hearts: Foster didn't kill anyone.

Foster was convicted for the 1996 murder of Michael LaHood Jr., who was shot following a string of robberies, by a man named Mauriceo Brown. Brown admitted to the shooting and was executed by lethal injection last year. Now Foster faces the same fate. So, if Brown was the shooter, what did the 19-year-old Foster do to get a death sentence? He sat in his car, 80 feet away, unaware that a murder was taking place.

DEATH PENALTY ABOLISHED IN RWANDA

The British newspaper The Voice reported August 13: Rwanda is to become the first country in Africa's Great Lakes region to abolish the death penalty. The Rwandan Government announced its intentions last week, in a move welcomed by Amnesty International. It is the 100th country to abolish the death penalty in law, with another 30 countries abolishing this in practice. It is the 14th African country to do this. The last death sentences were imposed in 2003. The last executions of people sentenced to death took place in 1998 when 22 people found guilty of genocide-related crimes were executed. Rwanda currently holds approximately 600 prisoners on death row. Despite their sentences being commuted to life sentences with the enactment of the legislation, there are continuing concerns regarding the cruel, inhumane and degrading prison conditions in which these prisoners remain detained.

IRAN: GOV'T, UN AND EU ALSO AGAINST DEATH PENALTY

It isn't just Italy that is fighting to abolish the death penalty in Iran, AGI-Agenzia Italia reported on August 6. A declaration from the European Union in February 2007 and a UN resolution in December 2006 also move in this direction with regard to the situation of human rights in Iran. Such is the content of a reply from Foreign Undersecretary Gianni Vernetti dated August 2 to the Chamber of Deputies at a parliamentary hearing. 'The matter of human rights in Iran is subject to constant attention from Italy and the international community,' Vernetti explained. In the UN resolution, "profound concern" is expressed "for the carrying out of capital punishment" in Iran, "applied, furthermore, without respect to guarantees in trials" and, from an operational perspective, "asks Tehran to abolish the death penalty, putting an end to the execution of minors and stoning sentences".

Vernetti added that the Government has adopted "constant action with its EU partners both for individual capital sentences, and in emphasising the Union's position with regard to the death penalty". Because of this, "in February 2007, with a declaration in the name of the EU, the rotary presidency expressed its disappointment to Iranian authorities for the death sentence of four Ahwazi Arabs, accused of allegedly taking part in terrorist activities". At the same

time, the EU also raised the question of executions in the country following "death sentences on minors, both with an official step to the Iranian authorities, on the 1st of May this year, both with a declaration by the German presidency, dated the 25th of May. On these occasions, it was disappointed at how the continuous executions of minors violate the international agreements signed by Iran and are in contrast with the moratorium announced by Iranian authorities in 2005".

'ABO KAB' NO LONGER FACES DEATH SENTENCE

An appeals court threw out the death-penalty verdict August 4 for a Saudi youth found guilty of negligent homicide in the death of three boys and the injury of two others two years ago in a stunt-driving accident. "This is a great step and this is what we have been waiting to hear for so long," Khaled Abu Rashid, the defense lawyer, told Arab News. "The court will probably announce its verdict soon and whatever it is will be fair as long as it is not a death sentence."

The stiff penalty for accident-related deaths comes at a time when Saudi society is dealing with a growing trend of young men using public streets as their venue for dangerous stunt-driving and "drifting" gatherings that periodically claim the lives of drivers, passengers or bystanders. Faisal Fouzan Al-Otaibi, known by his nickname Abo Kab - "Father of the (Baseball) Cap" - was sentenced to death, but the verdict was reversed on the basis that the deaths were accidental and that the boys killed were willing participants in the stunt-driving maneuvers. (Defense lawyer) Abu Rashid filed an appeal on June 7, claiming that while the behavior was stupid and careless, it did not amount to premeditated homicide, a crime that under Shariah law is punishable by public beheading.

MOVE TO ABOLISH DEATH PENALTY BLOCKED IN KENYA

Parliament has blocked an attempt by an MP to have the death penalty abolished, Members on both sides of the House criticised motion-mover Paddy Ahenda, describing him as an ordinary man who fell in love with murderers when he lived in the U.S. for two years. MPs urged the government to start executing convicts on death row, The Nation newspaper reported on August 1. There have been no executions since 1985. Justice Minister Martha Karua and Foreign Affairs Assistant Minister Moses Wetang'ula said the decision to abolish the death penalty should be made by Kenyans at a different forum.

Ms Karua challenged assistant minister Koigi wa Wamwere and MPs Ochilo Ayacko (Rongo, Narc) and Mr Ahenda (Kasipul Kabondo, LDP) to push for the removal of the death sentence from the country's law books in the public court. "I challenge those who are pushing for the abolition of the death sentence to go to Kenyans outside there and tell them of their intentions. You cannot come to the floor of this House to seek to abolish death penalty. This is a matter where you need to carry the public along," said Ms Karua. Citing the increased spate of crime in the country and public support for the penalty during the Bomas conference, she said the Government would not respond to pressure from international lobby groups which had failed to convince their own countries to delete similar laws.

"The Government is only sensitive to the wishes of Kenyans. We know that the Honourable Ahenda is looking at it from the point of view of international lobby groups pushing for abolition of the death penalty," she added.

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