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By Kimia Sanati

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RIGHTS: States Fuel 'Honour Killings'

By Abderrahim El Ouali

CASABLANCA - State-directed violence, the refusal to give up the death penalty and the holding of public executions are some of the principal factors that are supporting the continuing resort to the age-old practice of 'honour killings', murder to cleanse a family name of shame.

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DEATH PENALTY-IRAN: Top Campaigner Harassed, Hangings Increase By Kimia Sanati

TEHRAN, Jan 14 (IPS) - Emadeddin Baghi, Iran's leading anti-death penalty campaigner, is back behind bars in the country's notorious Evin prison after intense harassment leading to his hospitalisation and concern that he may have suffered a heart attack.

Three days after Christmas, Baghi, 48, was taken ill in his cell. Alarm was raised by a fellow-prisoner with whom he shared a cell in the high-security section of the prison.

Baghi was immediately taken to the prison hospital. Later in the day he suffered a second serious reversal and concerned medical staff ordered his transfer to an outside civilian hospital for further tests and treatment.

In this hospital Baghi was allowed visits by his family before being returned to jail.

Baghi's illness came after weeks of interrogation by Iran's intelligence services following his arrest on Oct. 14, according to his family in a Nov. 6 statement made to the Iranian Students News Agency after being allowed their first visit. His arrest was to serve out a one-year sentenced imposed five years ago for allegedly revealing state secrets and disseminating anti-state propaganda during his human rights work.

In letters written from his prison cell to the judicial authorities and minister of intelligence, Baghi had threatened to go on hunger strike unless the authorities halted their "unlawful, psychological torture," according to sources.

Prison interrogation focused on Baghi's public activities as head of the Society to Defend Prisoners' Rights. On the night before being taken ill in his cell, there was a commotion in Baghi's prison section. He later learned that it was in a nearby cell where a student had committed suicide, according to sources.

In recent weeks, scores of students have been arrested and jailed for holding meetings and campaigning against a clamp-down on human rights.

Baghi had also publicly condemned the rights violations and escalation in executions. Shortly before his arrest, he issued an open letter criticising the reformist parties for not speaking up against the wave of hangings justified by hardliners for tightening security.

During 2007, Iran became the world's second most active state executioner after China. Based on reports in the local press and confirmed by Amnesty International, the number of executions for the year exceeded 300. This is a 70 percent increase on the number of known executions in 2006.

At least six of those executed in 2007 were child offenders, according to Amnesty International. More than 70 of the 250 on death row are believed to be child offenders.

The passing of the United Nations General Assembly's moratorium on executions on Dec. 18 was ignored by Iran. On the following day, four criminals were executed in the Evin prison, according to press reports.

Since Jan. 1, the gallows of Evin prison have been the busiest in the country. On Jan. 2, there were eight hangings. They included one young woman, Raheleh Zamani, who reportedly killed her husband after learning of his affair.

So far this year, there have been at least 23 executions in different places in the country. There have also been amputations of the hands and feet of five robbers.

Since his return to prison, Baghi has been held in the prison's general ward, an apparent relaxation in his prison regime in face of concern over his health and protest over his treatment from such bodies as the European Union, Reporters Without Borders and Human Rights Watch.

The authorities have moved fast to head off any public show of solidarity. On Jan. 5, they blocked all domestic access to an internet site set up by Baghi's friends and supporters, www.freedomforbaghi.blogspot.com.

The present harassment of the human rights activist comes after years of repression.

In 1995, Baghi was suspended from his university teaching post. Blacklisted for any academic or journalistic posts, he was forced to work as a manual labourer to support his family.

In the late 90s, Baghi helped expose the role of the intelligence services in the murder of dissident political activists and five journalists. Two of those murdered were Darioush Forouhar, president of the Iranian National Party (INP) and his wife Parvaneh. The INP was the first party in Iran to call for the abolition of the death penalty.

Fifteen agents were eventually tried and found guilty of the murders. But higher responsible officials have never been brought to justice.

In 2000, Baghi was sentenced to two years in prison for his human rights activities, including the publishing of an article on the death penalty arguing that abolition would not be contrary to Islamic law. This greatly angered the Iranian religious establishment.

In 2005, Baghi founded Iran's first anti-capital punishment organisation, the Association for the Right to Life. In the same year, he was honoured with one of France's top human rights awards, the Civil Courage Prize. But a long-enforced travel ban prevented him from receiving it personally.

In an interview with IPS last May, Baghi said the authorities had prevented him from publishing a total of seven books. But he hoped to get around this ban, on his book on the death penalty, by arranging for it to be printed in Afghanistan.

"For many activists, it is only the political prisoners who really matter. Baghi is practically the first person here who defends the rights of ordinary citizens," an activists and journalist told IPS after hearing of Baghi's collapse in prison.

"When the police cracked down on the so-called "hooligans" some months ago, throwing them into dungeons and executing them, it was Baghi who courageously defended their rights, even though

the massive state propaganda machine did succeed in almost erasing all public sympathy for these people.

"Baghi is now paying for standing up for the rights of people almost nobody else wanted to defend." (END/2008)

RIGHTS-IRAN: Gov't "Leading by Fear", Activists Say By Omid Memarian

BERKELEY, California, U.S., Jan 17 (IPS) - Iran's recent use of extreme punishments such as amputations and public executions has deepened concerns about the situation of human rights amid the strict enforcement of Islamic law, which has worsened since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hardliner government came to power in June 2005.

"We've been concerned about the rise in executions in Iran in the past year, and we are very alarmed to learn about the recent case of amputations, which are a particularly cruel and brutal form of punishment," said a specialist on Iran at the New York-based Human Rights Watch, who preferred not to be named.

Just last week in southern Iran, the right hands and left feet of five convicted robbers were amputated. The government argues that such severe sentences act as a deterrent, although no correlation between these unpopular punishments and a decrease in crime has been proven.

Iranian human rights activists have vigorously protested the new wave of state-sanctioned violence. However, the government has largely ignored domestic and international objections.

On Nov. 20, 2007, the Third Committee of the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution condemning Iran's human rights record and calling upon the Iranian government to eliminate all such cruel practices. The resolution was adopted by 72 votes in favour, with 50 against and 55 abstentions.

In its resolution, the General Assembly expressed "its very serious concern" at a range of egregious human rights violations, including torture, flogging, amputations, public executions, stoning, execution of minors, and violent repression of women.

"These rulings show a digression of the situation with human rights in Iran," Shirin Ebadi, winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, told IPS in a telephone interview from Tehran.

"I would like to remind all that such laws and options to exercise such sentences were approved after the Islamic Revolution," she said, adding that, "We have repeatedly asked for a review of Iranian Penal Code. Unfortunately there has been no reaction from the authorities to change those laws."

Judicial officials have rarely publicised these sentences because of their unpopular nature. But the more the government insists on expanding the use of Islamic law in Iranian social life, the more radical elements within the judiciary feel free to carry out such punishments. The government argues that human rights is a domestic issue and has nothing to do with other countries and organisations.

But activists disagree. "Human rights is an international matter which transcends borders," said Ebadi. "Just as the Iranian government feels justified to express opinions about human rights violations in Palestine and in other countries, other people of the world are also justified in expressing their opinions about human rights violations in Iran."

Many observers in Tehran believe that the expanded use of unusually harsh punishments should be seen in the larger perspective of Iran's political structure, which is facing social, political and economic crises.

"The current government fully believes in the Islamic teaching of 'leading by fear.' They are also afraid of a velvet revolution," said Issa Saharkhiz, a prominent journalist and political analyst, in a phone interview from Tehran. "The government thinks that only through establishment of a state of fear, political oppression, and limitations on publications and cultural activities can it overcome the increasing dissatisfaction, ensuring and extending its own existence."

"This thinking explains the heavy and violent sentences, such as an increase in imprisonment verdicts, heavy bails, prison terms for political, journalist, and activist prisoners, sometimes adding floggings to their sentences, and in the case of ordinary convicts, stoning sentences and most recently, 'death by hauling from height'," added Saharkhiz. "We can conclude that fearing eruption of unrest and uncontrollable protests due to increasing dissatisfaction, the political decision has been to intimidate."

"Ahmadinejad's cabinet's structure suggested a change in policy and strategy from the beginning, but no one could predict the extent," he said. "This is why many political activists raised concerns about the emergence of an intelligence-military environment during the presidential elections, encouraging everyone to vote. This call to vote was not received well by people due to widespread disappointment among civil society activists, urban voters, middle class voters, and those supporting protest elections boycott."

Asieh Amini, a women's rights activist and a member of the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign in Tehran, told IPS, "I believe institutionalised violence promotes violence amongst the citizens, especially among those who are stronger against those who are weaker."

"When I look at events of the past year, I see an overall increase in violence in the society, not limited to ordinary citizens," said Amini. "Part of these violent events takes place in the hands of government, such as an increase in the number of executions of individuals below the age of 18."

"The same is true of confrontations taking place on the streets, physical violence against civil society activists, students, workers, teachers, and especially women activists who are expressing their demands within legal frameworks, facing extremely violent public treatment," she said.

Iran hanged more than 298 people in 2007, a large increase compared to the 177 hangings in 2006.

In a report released on Jan. 7, Human Rights Watch condemned the Iranian government for relying on broadly worded "security laws" to suppress virtually any public expression of dissent.

The 51-page report, "'You Can Detain Anyone for Anything': Iran's Broadening Clampdown on Independent Activism," documents the expansion in scope and number of the individuals and activities persecuted by the Iranian government over the last two years.

*Omid Memarian is a peace fellow at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. He has won several awards, including Human Rights Watch's highest honour in 2005, the Human Rights Defender Award. (END/2008)

DEATH PENALTY: Uzbek Abolition Draws Line Under Past By Kuban Abdymen

BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan, Jan 17 (IPS) - The abolition of the death penalty in Uzbekistan -- the 135th state to abandon state-sanctioned killing -- effectively means the entire central Asian region has now consigned to history a punishment that was strongly associated with the days of the Soviet empire.

From Jan. 1, execution by firing squad in Uzbekistan will no longer be legal, and the maximum sentence will be life or long-term imprisonment. The reforms have been incorporated into new criminal code and were sanctioned by a presidential decree signed by Islam Karimov.

Over the past eight years, all five central Asian nations which gained independence with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 -- Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan -- have halted state executions.

Turkmenistan was the first to formally abolish capital punishment in 1999. Then came Kyrgyzstan in 2006, Kazakhstan in May 2007 and now Uzbekistan. Tajikistan introduced a moratorium in 2004 and is expected to abolish capital punishment shortly.

Kazakhstan must remove the exception of capital punishment for terrorist killings to join the group of more than 100 nations that have abolished capital punishment for all peacetime crimes.

Only one ex-Soviet republic, Belarus, still actively operates the death penalty. In December 2007, it executed by firing squad a serial killer after a trial from which the public was excluded.

"The abolition of the death penalty in Uzbekistan is the first step towards the country's democratisation," an elated Marat Kayipov, minister of justice in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan told IPS. "Today we can truly say that Central Asia has become a more humane region."

He added: "The reality of globalisation and pressure of world public opinion must have pushed Uzbekistan to take this essential reform step. Uzbekistan has listened to the world after the tragic events in Andijan in 2005."

In May 2005, there was a massive loss of life when Uzbek police and army fired on unarmed protesters in the eastern city of Andijan. The true number killed and the exact cause of the unrest have never been made public.

In the aftermath, there was a clampdown on all dissent, and non-

governmental organisations were shut down. Thousands of Uzbeks are believed to have attempted to flee to neighbouring countries, especially Kyrgyzstan.

Regional neighbours and human rights activists are clearly hoping that Uzbekistan's abolition of the death penalty may signal the beginning of a new era of less repression and more openness in what has been until now one of the world's most closed societies.

Amnesty International, in welcoming news of the abolition, called on Uzbek authorities to release information about the past operation of the death penalty. For years Amnesty has been campaigning for Uzbekistan to disclose the burial sites of those executed.

"No one knows how many people have been sentenced to death in Uzbekistan and how many were on death row," Akin Toktaliev, chairman of the non-government Committee to Defend the Rights and Dignity of the Kyrgyz People told IPS.

Numbers vary enormously. Some human rights activists have estimated that about 1,000 were on death row before abolition, according to Penal Reform International.

"There have been many reported cases of torture leading to the death of prisoners in jails," Sultan Ikramov, head of the Uzbek independent committee on human rights said, raising another issue of alleged extra-judicial killings.

"Prison relatives have been appealing to us for information about the conditions in the Uzbek jails. The conditions there are just not acceptable," he added.

Another group of Uzbek human rights activists based somewhere outside the country, the Rapid Response Group for the Prevention of Torture in Uzbekistan, in a statement issued before the abolition announcement, welcomed the approaching reform but criticised its limitations.

"This is one of the first necessary steps for the liberalisation of the criminal justice system," it said cautiously. But the proposals fell far short of the Council of Europe's recommendations for the humane management of prisoners sentenced to life or long-term imprisonment.

It noted that life-imprisonment in Uzbekistan meant 25 years in the most severe prison conditions before being allowed to apply for a pardon.

This was also particularly harsh and inflexible. For the first ten years prisoners were allowed only one short meeting with relatives a year, one telephone call, and there was a "cruel and severe" ban on working. There was also no distinction between the different types of long-term prisoners.

"Some long-term prisoners have been members of criminal gangs with long criminal records. But the majority are respectable citizens who led stable, normal lives before sentencing. Most could be released conditionally much earlier and should have the right to apply for a pardon at any time," it said.

The group noted with concern that recommendations on pardon applications and transfer through the prison system would be made by penal officials "without any public control."

The group also raised the issue of the absence of any apparent provision for the correction of miscarriages of justice.

This issue was addressed in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan when it abolished the death penalty at the end of 2006. The cases of all 169 former death row inmates are now being reviewed. So far 60 cases have been heard.

Kyrgyzstan also offers an example of the difficulties faced by all former Soviet republics in adopting essential reforms to their penal system after the abolition of the death penalty. It also suggests how Uzbekistan might be encouraged to seek help by opening its borders to the rest of the world.

"We are currently receiving financial support from international organisations to improve the conditions in prison," said Kayipov. With this, prison rations were increased by 50 percent last year.

A new prison building programme is now being discussed to house the newly created category of life and long-term prisoners.

"Although the Kyrgyz government does not have the resources to build these, there are international organisations which could help us," Tursunbek Akun, chairman of the Presidential Committee on Human Rights in Kyrgyzstan told IPS.

"We also need to learn from these how to run special projects for long-term prisoners," he added. (END/2008)

DEATH PENALTY:

Beijing Sentence Shakes Malaysia's Own Policy By Baradan Kuppusamy

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 23 (IPS) - Malaysia's unshakable stand on the death penalty appears to be wavering as a country unites in sympathy and outrage over the plight of a young Malay woman sentenced to death in China for allegedly acting as a drug courier.

Umi Azlim Mohamad Lazim, 24, a university science graduate from a poor Malay family of rice farmers, admitted to having 2.9 kilograms in her luggage when she was arrested at Shantou airport last January.

She told a court in southeast China during her trial in May 2007, that she was travelling for a highly-paid job she secured over the internet. But she was unaware what was in the bag she was carrying for a Nigerian friend. The judge rejected her explanation and sentenced her to death, the usual sentence for such an offence.

"She thought she was carrying important corporate documents," her mother, Umi Ibrahim, told IPS. "We cry everyday ... what can we do? We want her to live not die."

Most Malaysians appear to share the mother's anguish.

The case is fast-developing into an emotive national issue. Politicians have set aside their differences to halt Lazim's execution. The ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its rival the Islamic fundamentalist Pan Malaysian Islamic Party are even vying in their efforts.

Both are collecting money for the family, working to arrange family visits and promising they will save Lazim from execution.

The government is at a distinct disadvantage in the race to save Lazim. Malaysia's punishment for drug-related crimes is as harsh, if not harsher, than most other countries. The government supports the death penalty.

"Malaysia has suddenly woken up to the fact that ordinary Malaysians are now caught in the same death-penalty trap that we put others in," Nagarajan Surendran, a human rights lawyer and executive co-director of Malaysians Against the Death Penalty, a NGO campaigning against capital punishment, told IPS. Trafficking in more than 200 grams of dangerous drugs carries a death sentence.

"Today there are about 300 people on death row here, mostly for drug offences," Surendran said. Many of the 359 people executed from 1980 to 2001 had been sentenced for drug offences.

Much national outrage is today focused on how the Chinese might eventually end Lazim's life, although her sentence has been suspended for two years on humanitarian grounds. "People are shot in their heads with rifles. It is a horrific way for a young girl to die," said Surendran, expressing a widely-expressed view.

The case has also suddenly brought to public attention a number of others. There are some 30 young Malaysian women either sentenced or awaiting trial for drug-related offences in more than a dozen countries besides China, including Japan, Brazil and Peru. Several could be sentenced to death.

Many are university graduates lured by offers of high salaries and opportunities to travel. Behind the tempting offers are shady front companies run by international drug cartels.

"The syndicates are willing to throw money at the unsuspecting girls before they make their moves," federal narcotics department director Bakri Zinin told local newspapers in November.

The problem of young Malaysians caught ferrying drugs is already posing a major problem for the foreign ministry. Diplomats are kept busy finding defence lawyers, monitoring trails and making regular health and welfare checks on the young women.

"Their fate is a major embarrassment to the government," said Ramu Annamalai Kandasamy, a human rights lawyer representing many such clients and death-row inmates, told IPS. "The government has to come up with a firm policy on how to help the victims on death-row in far off countries."

Surendran's proposal is for Malaysia to introduce an immediate moratorium on executions. This would lift the threat of execution of foreigners on Malaysian soil. Other countries would be likely to respond in kind.

"Malaysia would get a more sympathetic hearing if it imposed a moratorium. One good turn deserves another," he argues.

"People would understand," he adds, suggesting that the public would agree that a change in policy over the death penalty was the most diplomatically effective way of saving the lives of condemned

Malaysians on foreign death-rows.

A moratorium could also help secure the reduction in other harsh sentences imposed on Malaysians by foreign courts, diplomatic sources say. Peru was ready to reduce sentences of up to 20 years imposed on Malaysians in return for the sparing five of its nationals on death-row in Malaysia, they add.

Many opposition politicians would support a moratorium, or even total abolition, if it could save the lives of Malaysians like Lazim.

"These girls made a mistake in their youth. They deserve to live, not to be killed so cruelly. Imagine the pain their loved ones are going through," said opposition lawmaker Teresa Kok.

"If Malaysia abolishes the death sentence it can stand on a higher moral ground and ask foreign countries to spare the hangman's noose.

"It is time Malaysia complied with international standards," she added, citing the U.N. General Assembly resolution last December calling for a moratorium on executions. The resolution urged all states that still maintain the death penalty "to establish a moratorium on executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty". (END/2008)

RIGHTS-TRINIDAD: Gov't Flirts with Return to Hanging Days By Peter Ischyron

PORT OF SPAIN, Jan 25 (IPS) - Trinidad and Tobago's newly-appointed attorney general Brigid Annisette-George may well have been testing out public opinion when she let it be known at the start of the New Year that "anything is possible" regarding the resumption of hangings in the twin-island republic.

"The law is the death penalty. That is the law," she told reporters briskly when quizzed as to whether the Patrick Manning administration, which returned to power on Nov. 5, was contemplating executing convicted killers as part of an overall strategy to stem the number of murders that last year reached a record 382.

The government is coming under increasing pressure from the private sector, opposition politicians and public opinion to do something about the soaring crime rate, particularly as the first violent days of the year suggested that the murder rate for 2008 could spiral even higher.

The government has already rejected the draconian measure of a national state of emergency. "If you tell me what a limited state of emergency will achieve that cannot be done without then I will be prepared to discuss the matter with you," Manning said three days before his national security minister Martin Joseph outlined to parliament his new crime measures on Jan 7.

Later, on Jan 15, Manning signalled that his preferred solution was to return to executions, the last of which was carried out in 1999 when Anthony Briggs was sent to the gallows for the murder of a taxi driver in 1992.

"What we are talking about is enshrining in the law the conditions under which the death penalty can be carried out and therefore it is not left to the judgement of others," Manning told local business

people.

He added: "There have been a number of Privy Council decisions that have acted as constraints to the carrying out of the death penalty." This would now be discussed in parliament and put to the people as an operating death penalty was a "very important" measure in reducing the murder rate.

The London-based Privy Council is the island's highest court, despite the 2004 establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago-based Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) which regional governments want to be the Caribbean's final court of appeal. While all Caribbean countries are signatories to the original jurisdiction of the CCJ, only Barbados and Guyana have signed up to its appellate jurisdiction.

Regional governments have long complained that the Privy Council has restricted them in carrying out the death penalty. In particular, the Pratt and Morgan ruling in 1993, named after two convicted Jamaican killers, set a five-year time limit for executing convicted murderers after sentencing.

In December last year, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution calling for moratorium on executions leading to the eventual abolition of the death penalty worldwide. Thirteen Caribbean countries voted against the resolution accusing the co-sponsors, including all the E.U. members, of wanting to impose their will on other countries. Barbados said the region had also been threatened with the withdrawal of aid over the issue.

The announced debate in the Trinidad and Tobago parliament over the carrying out of the death penalty is likely to take place in mid-February. Lawmakers would need to amend the constitution by a special majority to circumvent the Privy Council's restrictions on executions.

Ahead of the parliamentary debate, powerful and influential voices have been expressing their views, many of them staunchly opposed to a return to hangings. There are currently some 74 people waiting on death row, including eight women.

"At a time when virtually every 'first world' country has abolished the death penalty, resuming hanging will banish us to 'bush country' status and (expose us to) international ridicule in one swoop," the Trinidad and Tobago Humanist Association said in a statement.

Many studies had shown that the death penalty was not a murder deterrent. "There is also the ever-present danger of executing the innocent, especially in countries with police and legal systems as shaky as ours. Crime will not be reduced by grabbing at irrational, barbaric, quick-fix ideas," the statement added.

The president of the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers' Association, Karen de Montbrun, called for the debate on the death penalty to be level-headed, rational and free of emotion.

"If the main objective is a reduction in violent crime, we need to examine the empirical evidence on whether or not carrying out the death penalty has a direct impact on the level of crime," she argued.

Former opposition legislator and a member of the government-appointed national crime and justice commission Gillian Lucky, said there needed to be more discussion about the alternatives to the death penalty.

"There must be extensive public consultation on the issue," she argued. "There should be conferences and forums whipping up public awareness on the subject and enabling the entire society to make an informed choice." Finally, there should be a referendum to decide whether to abolish the death penalty.

Former attorney general and human rights lawyer, Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj, under whose government nine members of a gang were executed in 1999, was scathing in his criticism of Manning for calling for a return to these hanging days which ended in that year.

"It is a national joke for the prime minister in a situation where there is a 10-percent detection and a one-percent conviction rate to talk about implementing the death penalty as a solution to crime," he declared.

Maharaj suggested the prime minister had abandoned his once progressive views. He recalled that in 1998 Manning had criticised the decision to revoke the country's membership in the United Nations Committee on Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

"A man fighting for his life should have the remedy of going to the two international human rights bodies," Manning had said at the time.

The Anglican Bishop Calvin Bess acknowledged the "huge problem" of the murder rate but called for no rash decisions. "I don't think the answer is to rush headlong into hangings," he said.

Not surprisingly, Manning's expressed intention to resume hangings has been welcomed by many ordinary concerned citizens, some of whom have expressed their views in the local newspapers, radio and television talk shows.

"They should resume the hangings to reduce the murders," Shelly Ann Arthur, a 40-year-old businesswoman, told one newspaper.

Executions were long overdue, added Larry Pierre, 46. "It is biblical and if they resume it the crime rate will be reduced," he said. (END/2008)

RIGHTS-AFGHANISTAN:

Internet Article Lands Journalist on Death Row By Tahir Qadir

MAZAR-E-SHARIF, Afghanistan, Jan 30 (IPS) - An Afghan court has sentenced a 23-year-old journalist to death for blasphemy, apparently after criticising the Prophet Mohammed's views on women's rights, and downloading and circulating material from the Internet.

Sayed Parwiz Kambakhsh, a reporter on the Jahan-e Now (The New World) daily newspaper and student of journalism at Balkh University, was arrested on Oct. 12 and charged with offending Islam and the Koran.

Kambakhsh was sentenced to death by a court in the northern Balkh Province on Jan. 22. He has already filed an appeal against his sentence, family sources told IPS.

"The death sentence was in accordance with Article 130 of the Constitution," Shamsurrahman, head of the Balkh local court, said

after the sentencing.

This provision apparently gave the court authority to rule in accordance with highly orthodox Sunni Muslim jurisprudence in cases not covered by existing laws, according to sources.

Kambakhsh had been charged after complaints by his fellow students at university, according to court documents. They had accused him of passing around blasphemous articles and "mocking Islam and the Koran." His professors had claimed that he had interrupted lectures to fire off questions about Islam.

"We collected many documents that proved the accusations," Shamsurrahman said.

Shamsurrahman claimed that the case had been heard in an open court and reporters could have attended. But members of Kambakhsh's family had not been invited because they were "not that important".

"All our hearings are held in the open," he declared, responding to widespread criticism that the public had been barred from observing the trial.

A national security officer, who declined to be identified, told IPS that books on religion belonging to Kambakhsh and messages on his mobile telephone had also shown that he had "mocked" Islam.

Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, brother of the condemned journalist and himself a reporter for the London-based Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), dismissed the accusations as a baseless attempt to stifle freedom of the press.

"The court's verdict is unfair and the conduct of the trial was a violation of human rights," he told IPS.

"My brother told me only three judges and a prosecutor were present. Everything was decided beforehand. He said he was only invited in to hear the sentence being read out. 'I wanted to say something but they wouldn't allow me to comment', he told me," the brother said.

He added: "The article my brother is accused of writing was published on Internet websites years ago." He was not the author, he insisted.

Ibrahim claimed that his brother was being made a scapegoat for his own writing for the IWPR.

"This is a revengeful act aimed at me. The case is politically motivated, orchestrated by a political group."

But the governor of Balkh Province, Atta Mohammad Nur, denied he played any role in the arrest of the journalist and the charges.

"The decision was taken by the prosecution and court," he told a press conference.

Kambakhsh's arrest and death sentence has been denounced by several human rights organisations and Afghan journalists.

Two weeks before the trial, scores of journalists and members of the civil society groups gathered at the Balkh Human Rights Commission to call for Kambakhsh's release.

A spokesman for the South Asia Free Media Association's committee in the north of Afghanistan and editor-in-chief of the Jahan-e Now daily paper, Abdul Qayum Babak, denounced the sentence as an attack on freedom of expression.

"Parwiz (Kambakhsh) is being detained without any justification. He did not write any articles. This one he is accused of writing was on the Internet. If downloading something from Internet is a crime, why doesn't the government filter and block Internet websites?"

He added that possessing a book on religion and holding animated talks with professors was no justification for anyone being arrested.

"Kambakhsh's detention and holding in a cell with criminals is against the law and the international conventions on journalism."

Babak added that journalists were facing many difficulties in Afghanistan and their rights were "still being violated."

When asked what the Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission had done to ensure Kambakhsh's release, Qazi Sayed Mohammad Sami, head of commission's northern division, told IPS that he had called on officials to review the case.

"If someone is detained, international rules should be observed and the accusations should be clear. I am urging the responsible officials to assess this case very rigorously."

But clerics in Balkh and Konduz provinces have already asked the government not to back down and release Kambakhsh unpunished, according to sources.

Some students would also strongly oppose any amnesty. Shortly after Kambakhsh's detention, dozens gathered in Mazar-e-Sharif demanding the death penalty.

In a letter to President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, the president of the European parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering has called "in the strongest possible terms" for a stay of execution. (END/2008)

RIGHTS: States Fuel 'Honour Killings' By Abderrahim El Ouali

CASABLANCA, Jan 31 (IPS) - State-directed violence, the refusal to give up the death penalty and the holding of public executions are some of the principal factors that are supporting the continuing resort to the age-old practice of 'honour killings', murder to cleanse a family name of shame.

"The culture of violence in settling international and nation problems is fuelling these crimes," Bassam al-Kadi, supervisor of the Syrian Women's Observatory, SWO, a non-governmental organisation campaigning against 'honour killings' throughout the Middle East, told IPS.

"The active use of the death penalty against criminals and its retention on the statute books serve to confirm in the minds of some that they may also use this ultimate sanction to rescue a family's honour. Public executions, in particular, give an almost official stamp of approval to such acts of violence."

In December 2007, most of the Arab and Muslim world opposed the U.N. General Assembly's call for a moratorium on executions and the eventual worldwide abolition of the death penalty. The moratorium resolution still passed by 104 votes to 54. There were 29 abstentions.

Public executions before crowds of invited onlookers are still being carried out in at least two of the most orthodox Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia often carries out its beheadings in public with swordsmen wielding their weapons.

In Iran, where most of the executions are by hanging, public executions have been frequent. In the most recent of these some days ago, two alleged serial killers and rapists were hanged from cranes before crowds gathered in the central Iran city of Arak. State television broadcast pictures of the event.

On Jan. 30, Iran issued a decree that all public executions must in future be approved by the head of its judiciary. It also banned any future publishing of pictures of state-ordered killings. These have so far numbered 28 this year.

This directive is likely to reduce the number of public executions in the country.

But a similar judicial order in 2002 imposing a moratorium on public stoning has not been fully observed. Ja'far Kiani was stoned to death for adultery in the Qazvin province in July 2007, according to Amnesty International.

Amnesty recently demanded an end to this "grotesque and horrific" form of punishment. It also called for an end to the death sentence "for consensual sexual acts."

'Honour killings' are also often carried out for supposed violation of moral codes, particularly for allegations of adultery, according to many human rights campaigners.

Women are mostly the victims. Refusal to submit to arranged marriages and meeting men disapproved of by families are also reasons.

No one knows just how many 'honour killings' are committed every year.

"There are no correct statistics," Diana Nammi, founder of the London-based International Campaign Against Honour Killings, told IPS.

"They are mainly taking place in rural areas where there are no birth and death certificates. But I can assure you there are at least 5,000 every year, even more than 10,000. They are not just happening in one nation, but in more than 54 countries."

The Campaign Against Honour Killings, launched in 2003, hosts a website updated daily with reports from around the world. It operates a hotline for women who feel under threat.

"Pakistan has the highest number of 'dishonour killings' -- the term I use for calling them what they really are. Yearly there are believed to be between 800 and 1,000," Ellen Sheeley, a U.S. marketing

consultant who began researching the subject in Jordan in 2003, told IPS.

In Jordan, where the penal code provides for an average six months sentence for 'honour killings', there were estimated to be some 24 a year, according to the group Amman Net, quoting official sources.

"There are some 40 'honour killings' every year in Syria," said Kadi. His organisation also maintains a website and in 2007 some 10,000 people, mostly in Syria, signed an online petition condemning them.

Following the breakdown of law and order with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, there have been reports of a growing number of 'honour killings' in the country. Many of these have been recorded in the northern region of Kurdistan and in Basra in the south.

"In the Kurdish communities in Iran and especially Iraq it has become something like an epidemic," Nammi, of Kurdish origin who has lived in both countries before moving to London a decade ago, told IPS.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and the Arab world, often linked to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, is frequently blamed for some of the recent 'honour killings', according to reports.

"Islam is being misinterpreted to justify 'honour killings', Kadi agreed, expressing a view he had before the Iraq invasion.

"A large number of Islamic scholars definitely do teach a culture of violence that would justify these crimes. They are being followed religiously as if they were speaking the divine word."

He added: "They have even been attacking us for campaigning against 'honour killings'. They have accused us of being government mercenaries."

Sheeley, in her sampling of views across Jordan in 2003, found that 20 percent of all of those questioned agreed that Islam required family honour to be "cleansed" for promiscuous sexual behaviour.

"This finding points to the need for mosque and parental education to correct this lethal misunderstanding of the faith," she said. The actual source of 'honour killings' was believed to be "in misinterpretations of pre-Islamic Arab tribal codes," she added.

Sheeley hoped that legal reforms in the region could help to change attitudes and practices. In particular, Jordan could set an example to all other countries where 'honour killings' take place, by abolishing the articles of its legal code offering leniency to the perpetrators.

"Progress and success in Jordan could serve as an inspiration and model for other countries where these crimes are committed," she said. Some 89 percent of Jordanians she questioned supported a stiffening of penalties for the killers.

"In countries where the state and the laws discriminate against women...it sends a powerful message to all social institutions and to both genders," she added.

Kadi agreed that campaigners should direct their efforts to bring about equality for all before the law. "All laws that discriminate against women should be abolished. But the Syrian government is actually an opponent of this change in our country," he said.

"I am cautiously optimistic that change will come -- but deeply concerned about how many people will have to die before this happens," said Sheeley.

"This problem is solvable. It can be successfully addressed." (END/2008)

News from International NGOs

IRAN: DEATH BY STONING, A GROTESQUE AND UNACCEPTABLE PENALTY

As nine women and two men in Iran waited to be stoned to death, Amnesty International called on the Iranian authorities to abolish death by stoning and impose an immediate moratorium on this horrific practice, specifically designed to increase the suffering of the victims. In a new report published Jan. 15, the organisation called on the authorities urgently to repeal or amend the country's Penal Code and to ensure total adherence in the meantime to a moratorium on stoning issued by the Head of the Judiciary in 2002.

"We welcome recent moves towards reform and reports that the Majles (Iran's parliament) is discussing an amended Penal Code that would permit the suspension of at least some stoning sentences, in cases where it is deemed 'expedient'," said Malcolm Smart, Director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Amnesty International. "But the authorities must go much further, and take the steps needed to ensure that the new Penal Code neither permits stoning to death nor provides for execution by other means for adultery."

Iran's Penal Code prescribes execution by stoning. It even dictates that the stones are large enough to cause pain, but not so large as to kill the victim immediately. Article 102 of the Penal Code states that men should be buried up to their waists and women up to their breasts for the purpose of execution by stoning. Article 104 states, with reference to the penalty for adultery, that the stones used should "not be large enough to kill the person by one or two strikes; nor should they be so small that they could not be defined as stones".

The serious failings in the justice system commonly result in unfair trials, including in capital cases. Despite the moratorium imposed in 2002 and official denials that stoning sentences continued to be implemented in Iran, deaths by stoning have been reported. Ja'far Kiani was stoned to death on 5 July 2007 in the village of Aghche-kand, near Takestan in Qazvin province. He had been convicted of committing adultery with Mokarrameh Ebrahimi, with whom he had two children and who was also sentenced to death by stoning. The stoning was carried out despite a stay of execution ordered in his case and in defiance of the 2002 moratorium.

It was the first officially confirmed stoning since the moratorium, although a woman and a man are known to have been stoned to death in Mashhad in May 2006. There are fears that Mokarrameh Ebrahimi may yet suffer the same fate. She is in Choubin prison, Qazvin province, apparently with one of her two children.

Amnesty International is equally worried about the remaining eight women and two men who may face the same fate, and whose cases are highlighted in the new report. The majority of those sentenced to death by stoning are women. Women suffer disproportionately from such punishment. One reason is that they are not treated equally before the law and courts, in clear violation of international fair trial standards. They are particularly vulnerable to unfair trials because they are more likely than men to be illiterate and therefore more likely to sign confessions to crimes they did not commit. Discrimination against women in other aspects of their lives also leaves them more susceptible to conviction for adultery.

UZBEKISTAN ABOLISHES THE DEATH PENALTY

The trend towards total abolition of the death penalty has continued with Uzbekistan becoming the latest country to put an end to executions, Amnesty International said on Jan. 11. From Jan. 1 it becomes the 135th country in the world to abolish the death penalty in law or practice. Capital punishment has now been replaced with life or long-term imprisonment. Amnesty welcomes this move towards ending this cruel and inhumane practice.

There is concern that, prior to the abolition of the death penalty, relatives of executed prisoners were not informed about the dates and places of their execution and burial. Amnesty International urges the authorities of Uzbekistan to honour its commitment as a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to "make available to the public information regarding the use of the death penalty". They should ensure that the families of those executed receive full access to such information and be allowed to collect the executed prisoners' personal effects.

Amnesty International calls on the few remaining territories in the former Soviet Union which retain the death penalty to fully abolish it, thus making the whole region a death penalty-free zone. The only remaining executioner in Europe is Belarus, where the last reported execution took place in Dec. 2007.

CHINA: AMNESTY CALLS FOR END TO EXPANSION OF LETHAL INJECTION METHOD

Amnesty International Jan. 3 strongly condemned the expansion of China's lethal injection programme and called on the Chinese authorities to accelerate the abolition of the death penalty. "This move goes against the spirit of the Olympic Charter for the Beijing Olympics, which places the preservation of human dignity at the heart of the Olympic movement. There is nothing dignified or humane in the state killing of individuals by whatever means," said Catherine Baber, Director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific programme.

It has also taken place just weeks after the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for a worldwide moratorium on executions. Amnesty International also challenges Jiang Xingchang's, vice-president of the Supreme People's Court (SPC), to explain how lethal injection execution is more humane than execution by shooting. "The extension of the lethal injection programme flies in the face of the clear international trend away from using the death penalty and ignores the problems inherent in this punishment. Arbitrary application, miscarriages of justice including execution of the innocent, and the cruel and inhumane nature of the death penalty cannot be solved by changing the method of execution, said Baber."

According to Amnesty International, lethal injection as a method of execution raises particular concerns. These include:

- Diverting attention from the suffering inherent in the death penalty by suggesting that death by lethal injection is humane. Evidence shows that it can cause convulsions and a prolonged and painful death.
- The potential to cause physical and mental suffering through botched implementation.
- The involvement of health personnel in executions. Virtually all codes of professional ethics that consider the death penalty oppose medical or nursing participation.

Amnesty International has welcomed the Supreme People's Court review of all death sentences passed in China (in force since January 2007), which is expected to result in the reduction of the number of executions. Yet the lack of transparency in the application of the death penalty in China will make it impossible to assess or verify any change in the number of executions being carried out. "The Chinese authorities must take concrete steps towards the abolition of death penalty. As a first step, China must make public the actual numbers of people executed and radically cut the number of capital offences. A positive legacy for the Beijing Olympics can only be achieved when China's world record of executions comes to an end," said Baber.

SUDAN: ERITREANS AND ETHIOPIANS FACE RISK OF EXECUTION IF RETURNED HOME

A number of Eritreans and Ethiopians detained in Sudan could face detention without trial, torture and possible execution if they are forcibly repatriated, the Sudan Organisation Against Torture (SOAT) reported on Jan. 8. Four Eritreans were arrested on or around November 2, 2007 at the Sudanese border and are being held without charge under the National Security Forces Act of 1999 in Port Sudan State Prison after apparently evading compulsory military service at home.

The names of the detainees are as follows: Marhui Gbryrham, Fitouy Fshai Yingbr Mikaeel, Dislby Tsfa Brhan Hagoss and Ablom tfisty gbry Slasy. Human rights organisations have reported the lengthy detention and use of torture against individuals accused of skipping conscription in Eritrea.

Five Ethiopians remain in detention in Khartoum under the National Security Forces Act after being arrested from their homes in July last year. The names of the detainees are as follows: Haroun Idriss, Abdala Suliman, Badreldin Ali, Mohamed Amin Nardi and Ibrahim Albana. Sources say they were arrested along with four other individuals, Adam Pasilio, Minika Hailo, Faisal Mohamed Osman and Argana Slfim.

They report that members of the group had held refugee status in Sudan since 2004 and had permission to remain in the country, which was renewed periodically.

The Sudanese security forces deny that they detained Argana Slfim, whose current whereabouts are unclear. Following their arrests, Adam Pasilio, Minika Hailo and Faisal Mohamed Osman were deported to Ethiopia according to a ruling by the Khartoum North Criminal Court after they apparently confessed to residing illegally in Sudan. They have reportedly since been detained by the Ethiopian authorities and held in an unknown location. All of those arrested are Muslims belonging to the Oromo ethnic group.

There is a risk that any of them who are repatriated to Ethiopia could face death because of their past political activities.

HANDS OFF CAIN SPEAKS OF BELATED INTERVENTION BY THE POPE ON DEATH PENALTY

Elisabetta Zamparutti, Treasurer of the Italian Radicals and of Hands Off Cain has spoken about the belated intervention by the Pope on the death penalty at La Sapienza on Jan. 15. She said "Ratzinger has had many occasions that were more important and more useful for expressing himself on the abolition of the death penalty and the moratorium, and he has missed all of them." In fact, when we finished the Easter March at St Peters for the UN Moratorium on capital punishment, he didn't say a word. This was in contrast to what his predecessor did at the various marches that we have held.

During the debate at the UN, the Vatican spoke principally on sustaining amendments that acknowledged the right to life from conception that were presented by fundamentalist countries (Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iran, Libya and Sudan). In doing so, the Vatican therefore took the side of countries whose clear intention was to impede the approval of the resolution against the death penalty through a complete change of the text. The fundamentalism of the defence by the Vatican of the right to life from conception doesn't match the pragmatic approach it has taken on the death penalty, which it theoretically accepts. To use the words of Nunzio Apostolico in New York, its "use is necessary to protect society against an aggressor," save the acknowledgment that "society actually has many other ways of protecting its citizens."

WORLD PRESS REVIEW – JANUARY 2008

SUDAN HANGS TWO FOR RAPE AND MURDER OF FOUR YEAR OLD

Two Sudanese men sentenced to death for the rape and murder of a four year old girl were executed in a prison in Khartoum, Agence France Presse reported Jan. 1 quoting the local press. Motassem Abdallah Khairallah, 21, and Imad Tibn, 19, were hanged and their bodies handed over to their families amid tight security, the daily Al-Sudani reported Jan. 1. The execution had been due to take place on November 27 but was postponed at the last minute after an appeal by defence lawyers who said the two accused had not been given a fair trial. The appeal was dismissed. The two were sentenced to death and to 100 lashes each on January 21, 2007, for raping and murdering Muram Awad Sadiq in a case that caused outrage because it also took place during the Muslim feast of Eid al-Fitr in October 2006.

SIERRA LEONE: COMMISSION RECOMMENDS ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

The Constitutional Review Commission of Sierra Leone, has among other issues, recommended that the death penalty be abolished in all cases of treason or other crimes of political nature that do not directly result in the death of another person (s) and be replaced by life imprisonment, The News revealed on Jan. 11.

The Commission's Chairman, Dr. Peter Tucker, in presenting its report to President Ernest Bai Koroma at State House on January 10 recalled that the Commission was mandated in 2007 to review the 1991 constitution of Sierra Leone with a view of recommending amendments relevant to the current economic, social and political developments that have taken place both nationally and internationally. Dr. Tucker further revealed that 136 amendments were made, 15 of which were entrenched clauses that needed to be approved in a referendum before becoming law. According to Dr. Tucker, topmost among the amendments include the Recognition and Protection of Human Rights. Responding, President Koroma reportedly lauded the Commission for a work well done.

NORTH KOREA HANGS 'LABOUR HERO'

A co-operative farm chief once honoured by North Korea's founding president as a labour hero has been publicly executed for "starting a private farm", Asia News reported Jan. 4. The episode was reported by the South Korean humanitarian group, Good Friends. The unidentified man and two colleagues were shot by firing squad on December 5 in Pyongsong, north of Pyongyang. According to the group the condemned were executed by 90 bullets and that now their families have been interned in a

concentration camp. They are guilty of having privately sold products in order to maintain their "luxurious" lifestyle.

The association reports that the president of the co-op had been honoured as a labour hero. Then president Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994, had several times praised the farm chief and once gave him a watch engraved with his autograph. The farm chief was accused of failing to register 79 hectares of farmland that had been cultivated over the past decade. He allegedly fed retired soldiers with the produce and used them as his private bodyguards. Given his honourable career, he was charged with "betraying the guidance" of the late president, Good Friends said, adding that executions of "labour heroes" were rare. Following the executions, Good Friends said each province summoned co-operative farm chiefs and local party secretaries and warned them of harsh punishment for diverting produce.

NORTH KOREA: THREE SENTENCED TO DEATH OVER ILLEGAL FILMS

North Korean authorities have passed death sentences on three people involved in handling movies smuggled from China and South Korea, reported Economic Times on Jan. 16 quoting Good Friends, a Seoul-based aid group working in the North. The sentencing in the northern border city of Onseong last month is part of the communist state's crackdown on foreign influences,

Sentenced to death were a local farmer, a senior communist youth group worker and a schoolteacher. The 59 year-old farmer surnamed Jeon was charged with importing "illegal adult films" from Chinese dealers and selling them, it said. Seven other accomplices were ordered to undergo re-education. In another case the teacher teamed up with a senior supervisor of the socialist youth league to copy 80 South Korean-made VCDs, which are banned in the North, and to distribute them, the report further added.

"Harsh penalties were applied in the latest cases because of the central government's reprimand for repeated similar illegalities in Onseong," it said. North Korea has stepped up efforts to block the entry of foreign films, CDs and other multimedia material to protect the communist country and its people from what it calls "imperialist" influences.

JAPAN: RECORD NUMBER OF DEATH SENTENCES IN 2007

The number of people sentenced to death in Japanese courts in 2007 rose to 46, the highest in nearly three decades,

Kyodo News reported Jan. 13 quoting local media. There were at least 106 death-row inmates in 2007, a record high since 1980 when such data first became available, Kyodo News agency reported. The number of death sentences ordered by Japanese courts last year rose to 46 from 44 in 2006. Nine executions were carried out in 2007, the most in a year since 1980, Kyodo said.

VIETNAM: 3 SENTENCED TO DEATH FOR DRUG TRAFFICKING

The Ho Chi Minh City Court sentenced three members of a drug trafficking ring to death and two others to life imprisonment after a three day trial, VNAgency.com reported Jan. 26. Receiving the death penalty were Nguyen Thanh Mai, a 40 year old resident of HCM City's District 1; Van Toan, 35, of Binh Thanh District; and Nguyen Thuy Ngoc Bang, 25, of Go Vap District. Two were sentenced to life in prison and sentences of 13 to 20 years were handed down to six others. According to the court's verdict, between March 2002 and June 2003, the ring members trafficked 5.28 kg of heroin and gave it to a Vietnamese Australian named Kai to sell abroad.

INDIA: ONE GETS DEATH FOR ABDUCTION, MURDER

The court of the Additional district and Sessions Judge 1 in Hajipur, India, awarded capital punishment to Chintu Singh under Section 302 of Indian Penal Code, Times of India reported Jan. 29. Singh and four other accused were found guilty of kidnapping and killing a minor boy in 2006. Vikky Kumar, the son of vegetable vendor Sunil Kumar, was abducted from Paswan Chowk on February 27, 2006, while he was playing with his sister. Singh, a resident of Sonepur, had taken the boy on pretext of giving him a chocolate and later kidnapped him, police said. The sources said that though the kidnappers had taken Rs 1.05 lakh from the victim's father as ransom, they murdered the boy and threw his body in an area falling under the jurisdiction of Fakuli police station in Muzaffarpur district.

BANGLADESH: 10 PEOPLE SENTENCED TO DEATH IN POLICE-SLAUGHTERING CASE

Ten people were sentenced to death for murdering four policemen in Manda upazila, Naogaon district, Bangladesh. Six others were sentenced to life terms and five were given 10 years in jail, United News of Bangladesh reported Jan. 24. Tohurul Islam alias Azizul Huq, M Nurul Islam, M Shafiqul Islam, Abu Bakkar Siddiq, Nurunnabi Hasan alias Khokon, Shafiqul Islam, Sanjay Kumar Saha, Pintu, Dilip alias Shibu and Tamal alias Ferdous were all sentenced to death at a Speedy Trial Tribunal in Rajshahi. The convicts all belonged to the outlawed Purba Banglar Communist Party, commonly known as 'sarbahara party'. According to the prosecution, the convicts attacked Choubariahat in Manda upazila of Naogaon

district and ransacked several shops on August 25, 2006. They murdered Manda police station ASI Moij Ahmed and constables Ashkan Ali, Faridul Islam and Babul Mia when they tried to stop them.

QATAR: APPEAL COURT UPHOLDS DEATH PENALTY VERDICT

January 29, 2008: In Qatar, a Doha appeal court upheld the death penalty against a man, who was convicted by a first instance court of "premeditated murder," the Gulf Times reported on Jan. 29 quoting legal sources. The lower court convicted the 48 year old Qatari national on June 6, 2006, and sentenced him to death after the sons of the victim refused to accept blood money as compensation. According to the charge sheet, the accused murdered his compatriot colleague following a row on September 20, 2005. "The accused rammed the victim with his car after a drunken brawl over a Bahraini woman who was present in a party at a house," the prosecution said. The lawyer of the defendant argued that the witnesses were all drunk at the time of the incident and hence their testimonies could not be believed. But the court rejected his argument. The case will automatically be referred to the Supreme Court of Justice.

LIBYA: TWO GHANAIS EXECUTED FOR MURDER

Two Ghanaians have been executed in Libya for allegedly killing a citizen of that country, Daily Guide reported Jan. 28. The Ghanaians, together with another compatriot and a Nigerian have been on death row since 2002 after being convicted of murder under Libyan Sharia law. Attempts to secure their release through the intervention of President John Agyekum Kufuor were not successful, as the Libyan authorities stuck to their guns that the convicts must face capital punishment. The Libyans indicated that under Sharia law, it is only the relatives of the dead who can pardon the killers and therefore the President's request could not be granted. Daily Guide has learnt that the two Ghanaians, the Nigerian and another Ghanaian called Blankson were sentenced to death in 1998 for killing a Libyan, and were expected to be executed in 2002. Daily Guide has also learnt that relatives of the executed Ghanaians are demanding their bodies for proper burial.

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: HANGINGS MAY RESUME

The Patrick Manning government wants to use its new term in office to ensure convicted murderers are hung in Trinidad and Tobago, CaribWorldNews.com reported Jan. 16. The PM said government is moving to change the death penalty laws in the twin-island republic to ensure that the death penalty is carried out. "What we are talking about is enshrining in law the conditions under which the death penalty can be carried out and therefore it is not left to the judgment of others," Manning said. "There have been a number of Privy Council

decisions that have acted as constraints to the carrying out of the death penalty. And we are trying to streamline our legislation in order to remove this constraint. But the PM admitted the move will require negotiation.

TEXAS APPEALS COURT FIND DEATH ROW INMATE MENTALLY RETARDED

The Texas Court of Criminal Appeals has reduced a death sentence to life imprisonment for a death row inmate condemned for murdering a Houston-area convenience store clerk during a 1995 robbery, AP reported Jan 16. The state's top criminal appeals court handed down its ruling in the case of Daniel Plata. The court found that Plata, 32, was mentally retarded and thus ineligible for the death penalty.

The Texas Defender Service, which handled Plata's appeal, said its client was the 11th Texas death row inmate to receive a life sentence since 2002. That's when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a Virginia case that the execution of mentally retarded inmates was unconstitutionally cruel and unusual punishment. Plata was one of four teenagers charged in the robbery of a Stop-N-Go in northwest Harris County. The store's security camera showed Plata fatally shot cashier Murlidhar Mahbubani. Plata pleaded guilty during his capital murder trial and was sentenced to death.

In December 2006, a Harris County state district judge held a hearing on whether Plata was mentally retarded. In the end, state District Court Judge Mark Kent Ellis rejected some methods used by the state expert who found Plata's intelligence topped the Supreme Court's 70 IQ retardation standard.

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