

Beat: Politics

Rights group urges Iran to spare hanging survivor

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USPA News - Human rights group Amnesty International on Thursday called on the Iranian government to halt the execution of a convicted drug trafficker who survived a botched hanging last week, leading to conflicting views within the country as to whether the law requires a second hanging. The prisoner, identified only as 37-year-old Alireza M., was hanged at a prison in the northeastern city of Bojnord last week.

A doctor declared him deceased after he spent 12 minutes hanging from the noose, but the prisoner's family was shocked to find him breathing when they went to collect his body from the morgue the following day. Sadeq Larijani, the head of Iran's judicial system, has faced competing views as to whether the law requires Alireza to be hanged a second time. The prisoner is currently recovering in hospital, but a high-ranking judge told a local newspaper that a second hanging will take place once doctors have confirmed his health condition has sufficiently improved. "The horrific prospect of this man facing a second hanging, after having gone through the whole ordeal already once, merely underlines the cruelty and inhumanity of the death penalty," said Philip Luther of Amnesty International. "The Iranian authorities must immediately halt Alireza M's execution and issue a moratorium on all others." Family members were quoted as saying that the prisoner's daughters were "the happiest of all" when they found out their father was still alive. The man, now said to be in a "satisfactory" condition in hospital, had been sentenced to death for drug trafficking by the Revolutionary Court. "Carrying out a second execution on a man who somehow managed to survive 12 minutes of hanging - who was certified as dead and whose body was about to be turned over to his family - is simply ghastly," Luther added. "It betrays a basic lack of humanity that sadly underpins much of Iran's justice system." Murder, rape and drug trafficking are among the crimes which are punishable by death in Iran. At least 314 people were officially acknowledged to have been executed last year, following 360 officially acknowledged executions in 2011, but the actual figures are believed to be much higher. At least 287 people have been executed in Iran so far this year, according to Iranian authorities, but Amnesty International believes the actual figure is no less than 508. The vast majority of those executed in recent years were convicted of drug offences, according to the human rights group. Iran has the fourth highest rate of drug-related deaths in the world, at 91 per 1 million people aged 15-64, and is a major international transit route for drug smuggling. In recent years, Iran has received international assistance, including from several European countries and the United Nations, to help stem the flow of drugs across its borders. The Iranian government claims more than 4,000 security personnel have been killed fighting drug traffickers since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. But while the UN has praised Iran's counter-narcotics work, it has failed to mention the increasing application of the death penalty for drugs offenses. "It is natural that the Iranian authorities must combat the serious social, security and economic problems relating to drug trafficking and drug abuse but the reliance on the death penalty to combat drug trafficking is misguided and in violation of international law," Luther said. "People want to be protected from crime, but the death penalty does not make societies safer." The London-based rights group Amnesty International has said that members of marginalized groups, particularly Afghan citizens, are most at risk of execution for drugs offenses. There are as many as 4,000 Afghan nationals on death row for drugs offenses, the organization estimates. According to human rights groups, including Amnesty International, trials in Iran often fail to meet international standards of fairness. Proceedings, particularly those held outside of the Iranian capital of Tehran, are often summary, lasting only a few minutes. Mass trials also take place on some occasions. In October 2010, Iran's Interior Minister stated that the campaign against drug trafficking was being intensified and the Prosecutor General stated in the same month that new measures had been taken to speed up the judicial processing of drug trafficking cases, including by referring all such cases to his office, thereby denying them a right to appeal to a higher tribunal as is required under international law. Two months later, the amended Anti-Narcotics Law came into force, apparently making it easier to sentence to death those convicted of drug trafficking, according to Amnesty International. The law also extended the scope of the death penalty to include additional categories of illegal drugs such as crystal meth, possession of which became punishable by death. Family members of executed persons also face persecution and are often not given the bodies of their relatives for burial, according to human rights groups. Other family members have said that they had to pay officials in order to receive their relatives' bodies as payment for the rope used to hang them.

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