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## **DEATH PENALTY: Post-Genocide Countries Ban Executions to 'End Revenge'**

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More than 1,000 activists and experts attending this week's Fourth World Congress Against the Death Penalty in this Swiss city are building a network of cooperation to support local organisations campaigning for human rights in countries that retain capital punishment.

One-third of the world's countries still apply the death sentence, and 2,390 persons were executed in 2008, according to Amnesty International (AI).

Nevertheless, there was marked global progress towards abolition of the death penalty in 2008, said the London-based rights watchdog.

In fact a real change in the history of the death penalty has occurred over the last 30 years, said Mario Marazziti, spokesman for the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based organisation that promotes international relations founded on human rights and North-South interdependence.

Back in the 1970s, only 23 countries had abolished the death penalty, by removing it from the statute books or ceasing to practice it, whereas today United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reports that 141 nations have taken this step, or 139 countries according to AI, said Marazziti.

The discrepancy arises because "specialist organisations may have access to confidential information that one or two executions have been carried out in a couple of countries, without any publicity," so there is doubt about the status of one or two countries, the Italian expert said.

So "we have around 140 countries without the death penalty, out of 192 in the world," said Marazziti, who added that the figures "indicate a real acceleration in at least the past 20 years."

As well as strengthening an international support network for those campaigning against court-ordered executions, the World Congress, which ends Friday, is planning a common strategy for the U.N. General Assembly session in December that is due to discuss a resolution for a moratorium on the death penalty.

An appropriate strategy must include simultaneous action in every region of the world, Marazziti told IPS. The Community of Sant'Egidio is calling on South Africa, Russia and Brazil to commit themselves to this effort, and help bring in other players like Mexico and Chile, he said.

That way, it cannot be argued that this is a European initiative, or the product of a single school of thought. It will be a demand made by the whole world, the expert said.

Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain, which currently holds the EU rotating presidency, confirmed that he will push for approval of the death penalty moratorium resolution at the U.N. General Assembly.

Opening the World Congress on Wednesday, Zapatero said his government wishes to establish an International Commission Against the Death Penalty. Such a body would be a great help in securing universal application of an effective moratorium by 2015, as a step towards total abolition, he said.

The year 2015 was not chosen at random: it coincides with the deadline approved in 2000 by U.N. member countries for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which set targets for slashing hunger, poverty and disease and improving education, health, equality and preservation of the environment.

"As well as slavery and torture, the death penalty must be consigned to history. It's a barbaric and old-fashioned way of interpreting justice," said Marazziti.

"I think the MDGs mean that life must be respected under any circumstances, even when there is suspicion of a crime," he said. "I want that to be respected, because not all the MDGs are respected."

The countries where the most executions took place in 2008 included China (1,718), Iran (346), Saudi Arabia (102), the United States (37), Pakistan (36), Iraq (34), Vietnam (19), Afghanistan (17), and North Korea and Japan (15 each).

Changes are happening in the United States, Marazziti said. Even in the state of Texas, where there is a high level of support for the death penalty, "only eight new death sentences were handed down in 2009 whereas the previous annual average was 48. And (the states of) New Jersey and New Mexico have abolished the death penalty within the last two years," he added.

In China, two things have happened. "The Supreme Court removed the power to pass death sentences from the local courts two years ago, and observers said that this should bring about a reduction of up to 30 percent in new death sentences," he said.

And a few days ago, "the Supreme Court published official guidelines instructing tribunals not to give the death penalty except for very heinous crimes or crimes against the state. So, this is another good sign," Marazziti said.

Last month, Mongolia abolished the death penalty. Uzbekistan had already done so, and Kazakhstan has eliminated it for ordinary crimes.

Marazziti highlighted the cases of Cambodia, Rwanda and Burundi, "three countries that have really suffered the last three big genocides in contemporary history, yet feel that only without the death penalty can a reconciliation process be started in their societies. Otherwise revenge, and the thirst for revenge, will never end."

These countries' abolition of capital punishment is "a very symbolic and meaningful step that can be an answer to those countries that say: 'We have a high level of violence, we need the death penalty'," he stressed.

"I think that we are experiencing a positive trend to eradicate the death penalty in the world," said the Italian expert.

Originally many African societies did not have the death penalty. It arrived hand in hand with colonialism, because African nations copied European constitutions and many other customs, he pointed out.

But on this issue, Africa is now changing faster than the other continents, he concluded.

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