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EU continues efforts to achieve universal abolition of death penalty

10 October is the World and European Day against the Death Penalty. Despite a marked trend towards abolition and restriction of the use of capital punishment in most countries, numbers and manner of death penalty application worldwide remain alarming. While 139 countries - more than 2/3 of the countries of the world - are abolitionist in law or practice, still at least 5,679 executions were carried out last year. Where capital punishment remains in force, there are serious problems with regard to the respect of international norms and standards. This makes abolitionist initiatives the more important. The planned death penalty resolution during 65th UN General Assembly this autumn is expected to manifest further progress in the global trend towards global abolition which is truly cross-regional. The abolition of the death penalty is one of the thematic priorities in the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which is with over 30 projects supported so far the lead source of funding for abolitionist projects worldwide.

EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Catherine Ashton said: *"It is encouraging that the large majority of states have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. However, there is no room for complacency - every execution is one too many. This is why I have made our work on the abolition of the death penalty a personal priority."*

The EU considers the death penalty to be a cruel and inhuman punishment, which represents an unacceptable denial of human dignity and integrity. In its efforts against the death penalty, the EU is actively supported by states from all regions of the world. The EU uses all available means – diplomatic channels and raising public awareness - in working towards the goal of abolishing the death penalty throughout the world. The EU encourages public debate, strengthening public opposition and putting pressure on retentionist countries to abolish the death penalty, or at least introduce a moratorium as a first step. The EU also acts against the death penalty in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations; a culmination of this effort was the resolutions on the moratorium on the use of the death penalty, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 2007 and 18 December 2008. The planned death penalty resolution during 65th UN General Assembly this autumn is expected to manifest progress in the global trend towards global abolition which is truly cross-regional. The EU's political commitment has been matched by substantial financial support for concrete projects.

There is a worldwide trend towards abolition:

- In 2009, at least 5,679 executions were carried out, down from a minimum of 5,735 in 2008 and a minimum of 5,851 in 2007.

- Between 1993 and 2009, the number of countries that abolished the death penalty by law for all crimes, grew from 55 to 97.
- Today, 139 countries - more than 2/3 of the countries of the world - are abolitionist in law or practice.
- Of the 58 countries/territories retaining the death penalty, 18 were known to have carried out executions in 2009 (China, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the US top the league).

However, while figures of death penalty application around the world are decreasing, they not only remain much too high, but where capital punishment remains in force, there are serious problems with regard to the respect of international norms and standards, notably in the limitation of the death penalty to the most serious crimes, the exclusion of juvenile offenders from its scope, and guarantees of a fair trial.

The global abolition is and remains one of the main objectives of the EU's human rights policy and the EU is the leading institutional actor and lead donor supporting the fight against the death penalty. In 2009, the EU issued statements on over 30 individual death penalty cases and carried out more than 30 demarches and other measures regarding individual cases. After the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the future European External Action Service will further strengthen the EU's ability to speak with one voice to make the death penalty a feature of the past. HR/VP Catherine Ashton has also – in her speech in the European Parliament on 16 June 2010 – declared that the EU's work on abolishing the death penalty worldwide is a “personal priority”.

The abolition of the death penalty is also one of the thematic priorities for assistance under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). Since 1994, the Commission has funded through the EIDHR over 30 projects worldwide, with an overall budget of over €15 million, aimed at raising public awareness in retentionist countries through public education, outreach to influence public opinion, studies on how states' death penalty systems comply with international minimum standards, informing and supporting strategies for replacing the death penalty and efforts for securing the access of death row inmates to appropriate levels of legal support and training for lawyers. Building on this solid record, the EIDHR – following the last call for proposals on actions covered by the EU Guidelines on the Death Penalty – has allocated additionally more than €8 million to 16 abolitionist projects around the world, thereby making the EIDHR the lead source of funding for abolitionist projects worldwide.

For more information:

http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/human_rights/adp/index.htm

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/eidhr/index_en.htm

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