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Belarus: first execution of 2017 ignores continuing pressure for abolition

Amnesty International condemns the execution of Belarusian death row prisoner, Siarhei Vostrykau in April. News of this execution was communicated to his mother by the Regional Court of Homel in early May. According to the Belarusian NGO, Human Rights Centre Viasna, he was executed at some time between 13 and 29 April. The last letter his mother received from him was dated 13 April and Homel Regional Court received confirmation of his execution on 29 April. Siarhei Vostrykau had appealed to President Lukashenka for clemency. President Lukashenka has only granted clemency once since he came to power in 1994.

A petition launched by Amnesty International in November 2016, calling on Belarus to introduce an immediate moratorium on all executions with a view to abolition of the death penalty, has been signed by nearly 18,000 people from around the world including from many European countries as well as from Brazil, Nigeria, South Korea and the United States.

Siarhei Vostrykau's execution comes despite the Belarusian authorities' increasingly positive rhetoric regarding abolition of the death penalty. It has been denounced by the Council of Europe, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Belarus cannot continue to ignore the regional and global momentum towards abolition and maintain its isolated stance as the sole executioner in the whole of Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Two men remain on death row in Belarus and are at imminent risk of execution.

In Belarus, death sentences are implemented in strict secrecy and without giving adequate notice to the prisoners, their families or their legal representatives. Condemned prisoners are given no warning that they are about to be executed; instead they are taken out of their cells, told that their appeal for clemency has been turned down, and then forced to their knees and shot in the back of the head. Their families are only informed days or sometimes weeks later that their relative has been executed. In accordance with the Criminal Executive Code the bodies of those executed are not returned to their families and the location of the burial site is not disclosed. In October 2013, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus stated: "The way the death penalty is carried out in Belarus amounts to inhuman treatment."

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception. The death penalty violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

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