

Japan has year without executions

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TOKYO —

Japan has not executed anyone so far in 2011, the government said Wednesday, setting it up to be the first year in nearly two decades the country has not carried out a single death sentence.

However, the number of inmates on death row stands at a post-war high of 129 as a debate on the rights and wrongs of capital punishment continues.

In a legal quirk, executions—always carried out by hanging in Japan—are banned over the New Year period, with a moratorium between Dec 29 and Jan 3 as well as on weekends and public holidays.

A justice ministry spokesman confirmed late Wednesday afternoon that there had been no executions in the year 2011 until Dec 27. “We have not been informed of any execution so far during this day (Dec 28).”

Justice Minister Hideo Hiraoka has not signaled his intention to order the execution of any inmate in the year’s remaining days, the major daily Asahi Shimbun reported.

“I don’t think it has a great significance in itself,” Hiraoka told a news conference on Tuesday when asked about the possibility of a year without executions.

The ministry spokesman said the number of death-row inmates rose from 111 at the end of 2010 to 129 as of Dec 27.

The last execution in Japan was in July 2010 when then justice minister Keiko Chiba, a former socialist and lawyer, approved the hanging of two inmates, despite her long-time opposition to the death penalty.

In an unusual move, Chiba attended the executions and later allowed the media to visit the execution chamber at the Tokyo Detention House in a bid to increase public debate over the death penalty.

Apart from the United States, Japan is the only major industrialized democracy to carry out capital punishment, a practice that has earned Tokyo repeat protests from European governments and human rights groups.

Since the end of World War II, only five years have been free of executions: 1964, 1968 and three consecutive years from 1990.

Eighty-four inmates have been hanged in Japan since 1993, Kyodo news agency reported, quoting human rights groups.

Justice Minister Hiraoka has shown reluctance to approve any executions, saying national debate is needed on whether Japan should maintain or abolish the death penalty, which is generally reserved for those convicted of multiple murders.

Hiraoka invited experts from Britain and France last week to explain how the two countries abolished capital punishment, the conservative daily Sankei Shimbun said.

But there is growing frustration among families of murder victims.

“The case is not over until the death penalty is carried out,” said Masaya Miyazono, whose daughter was stabbed to death in 1999 by a man who was eventually condemned to death.

“I cannot die before the criminal does,” the 77-year-old told Sankei.

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