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Japan lifts secrecy on executions

TOKYO, Japan (AP) -- Japan hanged three murder convicts on death row Friday and for the first time publicly disclosed their names in a new policy that lifts Tokyo's cloak of secrecy surrounding executions.

Executions were carried out in Tokyo on Seiha Fujima, 47, and Hiroki Fukawa, 42, as well as Noboru Ikemoto, 75, in the western city of Osaka, the Justice Ministry said in a statement.

Previously, the names of those executed would have been withheld. One of the few industrialized nations to retain the death penalty, Japan had routinely been criticized by human rights activists for keeping details of its executions secret.

Amnesty International lauded the decision to release more information about the convicts, but strongly condemned the executions, which increased the country's total for the year to nine.

"Executions were again carried out suddenly, without advance warning to either the convicts or their families," Amnesty said in a statement. "We hope Japan will take steps in the near future to abolish the grave offense that the death penalty is to human rights."

Until November 1998, the only information the ministry would provide about executions came as a total figure for the year included as part of annual statistical data.

The Justice Ministry then decided it would announce when executions took place and the number of people executed, so that international bodies could better track the carrying out of criminal sentences, ministry official Shin Kukimoto said.

But until now, other information -- including the names of those executed -- went unreleased on the grounds that further details would be psychologically distressing to the inmates' families and other death row prisoners.

However, in response to requests from victims' families and others, the ministry said it has decided it will now release inmates' names in the interests of promoting greater openness and understanding about the appropriateness of the death penalty.

Fujima had been convicted for a murder and robbery carried out in 1981, followed by the murders in 1982 of a 16-year old girl, two of her family members and an accomplice that stemmed from an attempt to accost the teen, the ministry said.

Fukawa's conviction resulted from two murders and two cases of fraud connected to those murders committed over 1999 and 2000, it said.

Ikemoto, 75, was convicted for three murders and one attempted murder stemming from a dispute with a neighbor over garbage in 1985, it said.

Executions, which are carried out by hanging, are often done when Parliament is not in session or on Fridays. Critics say that is meant to avoid fueling public debate on [capital punishment](#).

Three convicts were executed in April, followed by another trio in August.

Based on the Justice Ministry's latest available data, 104 convicts remain on death row, Kukimoto said.

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