

Sub-Saharan Africa hailed as 'beacon of hope'

A new annual report on the death penalty describes sub-Saharan Africa as a 'beacon of hope' amid a decline in executions worldwide. **Legalbrief** reports that **Amnesty International** (AI) believes that there is a growing momentum in the region due to public pressure and the judiciary. Twenty countries across sub-Saharan Africa have now abolished the death penalty for all crimes and just two countries, Somalia and South Sudan, carried out executions last year. Its report noted that both Botswana and Sudan reportedly resumed executions this year. And Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has indicated that he will sign the first death warrants in nearly two decades to create fear among criminals. 'I feel like there's a momentum in sub-Saharan Africa and that's partly because of public pressure around that, and **it's partly because judges in some cases can use more discretion**,' said Steve Cockburn, AI's West and Central Africa deputy regional director for research.

In 2017, Guinea became the 20th country in sub-Saharan Africa to abolish the death penalty for all crimes, and Kenya's Supreme Court abolished the mandatory death penalty for murder, a remnant of a colonial-era penal code. Kenya's judiciary must now re-sentence death row inmates convicted of murder. 'For the first time as a country, we are beginning to really confront what (the) death penalty means to us as a nation,' Jedida Waruhiu, an official for the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, reportedly told **VOA News**. **Burkina Faso is drafting a new Constitution that rights activists expect will outlaw the death penalty**. The same goes for Gambia, as it continues with a host of reforms following the ouster of President Yahya Jammeh in 2016. 'It's a great thing. Here is something I was fighting for, for 40-something years. It's become real,' said Baba Leigh, a prominent Gambian activist who was once detained and tortured for his outspoken criticism of the Jammeh government's execution of prison inmates. Somalia had by far the most for the region, with Amnesty reporting 24 executions there last year. According to **VOA News**, Somali activist Abdi Salam Adan said the death penalty is needed to fight terrorism. 'And in Islamic law, if you kill you, have to be killed.' Amnesty has also decried the rising number of death penalty sentences in Nigeria, saying 621 people were sentenced to death in 2017, while more than 2 000 remained on death row. 'There are a total of 2 285 people on death row in Nigeria,' said Amnesty in the report, adding that this is the highest number in the region. A report on the **News24** site notes that it said the death sentences in Nigeria have risen over the past two years from 171 in 2015 to 527 in 2016, though no executions happened last year. 'The country bucked the trend seen elsewhere in the region, as sub-Saharan Africa made great strides in the global fight to abolish the death penalty,' Amnesty said.