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## DEATH PENALTY-CHINA: Rapid Death by Roaming Vans

By IPS Correspondents

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**BEIJING, Jul 19 2006 (IPS)** - Responding to criticism that it cruelly and arbitrarily executes a large number of its citizens each year, Chinese officials now are gradually moving toward what they say is a more discreet way of killing its prisoners: Mobile vans..

Human rights critics say they may look more like officially sanctioned roaming death squads, which simply allow China to execute its prisoners more quickly, easily and out of the public eye. Chinese legal officials counter that its fleet of mobile execution vehicles are a "more humane" form of carrying out death sentences.

Both sides agree they are a departure from publicly held execution rallies organised in the past.

"I think it is definitely a progress for China and it shows more consideration both for the people sentenced to death and for others (their relatives and the public)," Li Guifang, vice-chairman of the Criminal Affairs Committee of the All-China Lawyers Association, told IPS. "There is less pain and quicker death for the convicted."

Rights activists point out that the evidence from the U.S. shows that lethal injection, too, inflicts pain.

The middle kingdom has developed a fleet of mobile execution vehicles slowly, starting recently after cautiously experimenting with lethal injections for the first time in selected provinces since 1997. It is now adopting them on a larger scale in more localities.

As opposed to the shootings which took place in public, inmates are now executed in purpose-built vans in an almost clinical environment. Prisoners are confined to a bed, similar to an ambulance stretcher, and put to death with lethal injections. The contents of the drug cocktails used for the lethal injections are mixed in Beijing and delivered to local intermediate courts where the trials take place.

The exact number of vans being used is a state secret. What is known, however, is that Yunnan province alone has 18 mobile units in use.

Beijing officials plan to assign a mobile execution to designated provinces, but would not tell IPS which ones. IPS spoke with several Chinese officials involved with the programme on condition they would not be quoted.

The move from firing squad to lethal injection "demonstrates tremendous progress in China's criminal judgement proceedings," Yin Yong, director of Zhejiang province Supreme Court, told the state media in June.

First tried out in 1997 in Yunnan province – a backward southwestern region bordering the Golden Triangle and notorious for its drug trafficking – mobile death vans are now readied for use also in booming industrialised places where crime rates have soared, such as the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang and others. Zhejiang plans to start using them from Sep. 1.

Human rights groups claim China executes more criminals every year than the rest of the world combined. The exact number remains a highly confidential state secret. Amnesty International recorded at least 1,770 death sentences carried out in China in 2005 but it says the real number could be as high as 8,000.

The mobile death fleet is being touted by Chinese legal officials as the latest advance in China's judicial system as Beijing tries to revamp its international image ahead of playing host to the 2008 Olympic Games. According to Chinese press reports, each mobile execution van is priced at about 500,000 yuan (60,000 U.S. dollars) each.

They are now in vogue because they allow for death sentences to be carried out without the usual trip to the execution ground and they are cheaper. Lethal injections only require four people to assist in the execution while the usual practice of death by a firing squad needs many guards at the execution site and along the road to the site.

The vans also prove that China has abandoned a long-standing practice of public executions. After China signed the U.N. Convention against Torture in 1984, it issued new regulations banning execution rallies. Rights activists claim, however, the rallies have continued during the "Strike Hard" anticrime crackdowns first initiated by the government in 1983 and revived in 1996. These rallies no longer happen in large cities where foreigners live.

Yet as mobile executions chambers begin to silently roll into more and more towns, making capital punishment easier and faster to deliver, fears have risen amongst human rights activists and death penalty opponents that China is relying more on lethal injection because it is harvesting organs of executed prisoners in an effort to supply the country's growing market for organ transplants.

Chinese hospitals started organ transplants in the 1960s and now perform between 10,000 and 20,000 transplants annually, according to official figures. A kidney transplant in China costs about 7,200 dollars but this official price could swell to 20,000 or even 50,000 dollars if the patient is willing to pay more to obtain an organ sooner. Even those prices though amount only to a fraction of the price for an organ transplant in developed countries.

As patients from Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore flock to China for transplants, the business is bringing in thousands of dollars to the country's under-funded health system. Suspicions are growing abroad that the use of newly developed mobile executions vans may be linked to this boom. The British Transplantation Society and Amnesty International in May strongly condemned China for harvesting prisoners' organs.

China carried out 8,000 kidney transplants last year but only 270, or less than 4 percent of the organs, came from voluntary donations.

"The use of mobile execution chambers exacerbates existing problems with prison-related issues in China," Sharon Hom, executive director of Human Rights in China, wrote in an e-mail interview with IPS.

"It facilitates the black market trade in organ sales particularly because there is no access for independent monitors, such as the Red Cross, to prisons, detention centres, and labour camps."

In China, it is illegal to remove organs without the permission of the person in question or his family members, but critics say that these obligations are commonly violated not the least because of the secrecy surrounding such operations. Regulations issued in 1984 stipulate that the removal of organs from executed prisoners should be "kept strictly secret, and attention must be paid to avoiding negative repercussions."

Authorities routinely refuse to give relatives access to bodies of executed prisoners, cremating them hastily after the executions, says Robin Munro, a British expert on China's criminal

justice system.

"Once the body is cremated, it is impossible to determine whether any organs have been removed," he told IPS.

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