

'LANKA GEARING UP TO HANG DRUG OFFENDERS'

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Following up on his earlier pledge to hang drug offenders, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has recently signed papers for the execution, according to a top government source.

The move is in connection with the 'National Drug Prevention Week' being observed from June 23 to July 1, the senior official source told *The Hindu*, on condition of anonymity.

The government or the President's office has so far not officially commented on the development, which comes three months after President Sirisena announced that he had fixed a date to hang convicted drug traffickers, effectively lifting a four-decade-old moratorium on capital punishment.

Call for halt

Rights watchdog Amnesty International on Tuesday said it was "alarmed to learn" that the Sri Lankan government was preparing to execute at least 13 prisoners convicted in drug-related crimes.

In a statement, Amnesty urged Mr. Sirisena to immediately halt his "plans to resume executions" for drug offenders, referring to earlier media reports suggesting "preparations are under way".

However, Sri Lanka's Commissioner General of Prisons T.M.J.W. Thennakoon dismissed the reports as "completely wrong". "As of June 25, 8 p.m., I have received no official communication from the Presidential secretariat regarding this," he told *The Hindu*, when contacted on Tuesday.

Govt. ad

Last week, local media reported that President Sirisena was considering signing papers to execute drug offenders. In a full-page government advertisement on the 'National Drug Prevention Week', carried in the state-run *Daily News* on Monday, the words 'Death penalty for drug dealers' were highlighted in bold, red font within a circle, resembling a stamped seal.

Sri Lankan courts have sentenced many convicts to death in the past, but no one has been executed since 1976, with their sentences invariably commuted to life. The most recent verdict came last week, when the Colombo High Court awarded death sentence to a man found guilty of possessing 4.40 grams of heroin in 2013.

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