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Iran executes 24 in one of largest mass executions in three decades

Iran has conducted one of the largest mass executions in its post-revolution history when 24 convicted drug traffickers were hanged in a prison west of Tehran.

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The death sentences, which were carried out at the infamous Karaj prison, are the latest in a growing spate of executions that have seen Iran impose the death penalty more than any state apart from China.

At least 219 people have been executed in the Islamic republic so far this year, nearly as many as the 246 who faced the death penalty in 2008. China executed some 5,000 people last year, according to some estimates, more than the rest of the world combined.

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The deputy prosecutor in Tehran, Mahmoud Salarkia, said that the drug traffickers were executed at the Karaj prison on Jul 30.

"Their execution was approved by the supreme court," Mr Salarkia said, without disclosing the identities of the prisoners.

The Iranian authorities hanged 20 other drug smugglers at the same prison earlier in July.

Iran's method of execution has drawn particular criticism from movements opposed to the death penalty.

The Islamic republic's method of hanging involves slow strangulation so as to prolong the convict's suffering.

Many of the hangman's victims are sentenced after summary trials behind closed doors. Convicts are usually denied a defence lawyers and are often subjected to torture to secure a confession, campaigners say.

Many of those sent to the gallows are political prisoners, according to human rights groups.

Nineteen members of the Baluch ethnic minority have been hanged since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed victory in a controversial election in June.

Tehran says the death penalty is a necessary tool for maintaining public security and is only applied after exhaustive judicial proceedings.

Murder, rape, armed robbery, drugs trafficking and adultery are all punishable by death in Iran.

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