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Belarus urged to end capital punishment

by Catholic News Service

MINSK, Belarus -- Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz of Minsk urged his country to abolish capital punishment, after two 25-year-olds were sentenced to death for killing 15 people in a Metro bomb attack.

"No terrorist act can be justified, and the perpetrators should receive just punishment," Archbishop Kondrusiewicz told the Belarussian church's online news agency, Catholic.By. "But the church calls for bloodless methods for restraining and punishing offenders, best suited to the common good and human dignity. Given the opportunities available to the state for preventing serious crimes, cases where the death penalty is absolutely necessary are very rare, even nonexistent."

"I appeal to President Alexander Lukashenko and the parliament to impose a moratorium on the death penalty, then abolish it completely, replacing it with life imprisonment and pardoning those sentenced to capital punishment," he said.

On Nov. 30, the Supreme Court sentenced Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitry Konovalov for their roles in the April 11 explosion, which blasted ball bearings and nails into afternoon commuters in Minsk's Kastychnitskaya underground station.

Belarus, Europe's only country still carrying out death sentences, is believed to have executed up to 300 convicts with shots to the back of the head since independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, although official figures have not been released.

Kovalyov and Konovalov, both factory workers, were also convicted of two bomb attacks at Vitebsk in 2005 and a 2008 Independence Day explosion in Minsk that injured more than 100 people.

However, defense lawyers said prosecutors had provided no forensic evidence against the men, one of whom retracted his confession, claiming duress.

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