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40 years on from landmark death penalty declaration, executing States now an increasingly isolated minority

States that retain and use the death penalty are increasingly isolated and should take steps to join the global trend, Amnesty International said today on the 15th World Day Against the Death Penalty.

2017 marks [40 years](#) since Amnesty International fostered the landmark [Declaration of Stockholm](#), the first international abolitionist manifesto on the death penalty. Issued in 1977, the Declaration called on all governments to totally abolish the punishment:

“When the state uses its power to end the life of a human being, it is likely that no other right is inviolate. The state cannot give life, it should not presume to take it away.”

At the time of the declaration, only 16 countries — eight in the Americas and eight in Europe — had fully abolished the death penalty in law and practice. That number now stands at 105. A further 36 countries have either repealed the death penalty for ordinary crimes such as murder or effectively stopped using the punishment though it remains in their laws.

In 2016 only 23 countries carried out executions, with a small group of states – China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Pakistan – carrying out the vast majority.

Amnesty International is calling on all countries that still retain the death penalty to abolish this punishment and, pending full abolition, to immediately establish an official moratorium on executions.

World Day against the Death Penalty

This year the World Day against the Death Penalty focuses on the link between the death penalty and poverty. Research shows that people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately affected in their experience of the criminal justice system and often carry the burden of the death penalty.

People from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds can struggle to afford effective lawyers to defend them against criminal charges. The way in which people are able to navigate the criminal justice system is also affected by their level of literacy and whether they have influential social networks to rely on.

[Recent analysis](#) by Amnesty International of data relating to the use of the death penalty in China suggests a troubling pattern in which the death penalty may be meted out

disproportionately to people who are poor, those with lower levels of education and members of racial, ethnic or religious minorities. Only a full disclosure of all cases of judicial executions by the Chinese authorities would definitively establish the extent of this effect.

In [Saudi Arabia](#), between January 1985 and June 2015, 48.5% of all executions recorded by Amnesty International in Saudi Arabia were of foreign nationals, the majority of whom are migrant workers with no knowledge of Arabic – the language in which they are questioned while in detention and in which trial proceedings are carried out. They are often denied adequate interpretation assistance. Their country's embassies and consulates are not promptly informed of their arrest, or even of their executions. In some cases their families are neither notified in advance of the execution nor are their bodies returned to them to be buried.

Calls for action

On World Day against the Death Penalty, Amnesty International is launching an appeal for Hoo Yew Wah, on death row in Malaysia. He was convicted of and sentenced to death for drug trafficking, having been arrested in 2005. Amnesty International is calling on the Malaysian authorities to grant clemency to Hoo Yew Wah by commuting his death sentence.

Hoo Yew Wah is from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, leaving school to work as a cook for a street restaurant at the age of 11. He was 20 at the time of the crime, which was his first offence and was not violent. He has asked for forgiveness from the Sultan of Johor state, who has the ability to grant him clemency.

"If given a chance, I want to prove that I have changed. I want to look for a proper job and spend my life taking care of my mother".

Drug trafficking does not meet the threshold of the "most serious crimes" to which the use of the death penalty must be restricted under international human rights law. Additionally, the death sentence imposed on Hoo Yew Wah was mandatory which is also prohibited under international human rights law.

Hoo Yew Wah was convicted on the basis of a statement he made at the time of arrest in Mandarin – later translated by the police into Malay – without a lawyer present. He also says that on the day after his arrest, while detained at the District Police Headquarter in Johore, the police broke his finger and threatened to beat his girlfriend to make him sign the statement. The judges in his case dismissed these concerns.

Amnesty International is also currently asking its supporters to take action on other death penalty cases, including:

- The last [14 people stuck on death row in Benin](#), a country which has abolished the death penalty; and

- [Ammar al-Baluchi](#), who faces trial and the death penalty before the US military commissions at Guantanamo, having been tortured in detention.

Background on Amnesty International's 40 years of campaigning against the death penalty

Since 1977, Amnesty International has contributed in a variety of ways to the global effort to consign the death penalty to history, including:

- Monitoring death sentences and executions around the world and publishing [annual statistics](#);
- Supporting individuals on death row, campaigning on their behalf and in some cases – though sadly far from all – helping them to avoid execution;
- Encouraging abolition of the death penalty at national level, for example recently in [Mongolia](#);
- Helping to develop the international law and standards framework to restrict the use of the death penalty and strengthen its abolitionist goal;
- Playing an important role in supporting the successful adoption of the biennial [UN moratorium resolutions](#) – in 2007, for the first time, the UN General Assembly called for a halt to all executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty; and
- Contributing to strengthening the global abolitionist movement, including by working closely with the [World Coalition Against the Death Penalty](#).

A selection of highlights from Amnesty International's 40 years campaigning against the death penalty can be viewed [here](#). Further background including key debates around the death penalty is also available [here](#).

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime; guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual; or the method used by the state to carry out the execution. The death penalty violates the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.