
amnesty international

Facts and Figures on the Death Penalty

APRIL 1999

AI INDEX: ACT 50/02/99

DISTR: SC/DP

1. Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries

Over half the countries in the world have now abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

Amnesty International's latest information shows that:

- ! **68** countries and territories have abolished the death penalty for **all crimes**
- ! **14** countries have abolished the death penalty for **all but exceptional crimes** such as wartime crimes
- ! **23** countries can be considered **abolitionist de facto**: they retain the death penalty in law but have not carried out any executions for the past 10 years or more

making a total of **105** countries which have abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

- ! **90** other countries **retain** and use the death penalty, but the number of countries which actually execute prisoners in any one year is much smaller (see below).

(Reference: *List of Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries*, April 1999, AI Index: ACT 50/01/99)

2. Progress Towards Worldwide Abolition

More than **two** countries a year on average have abolished the death penalty in law since 1976 or, having abolished it for ordinary crimes, have gone on to abolish it for all crimes.

Over **30** countries and territories have abolished the death penalty for ordinary crimes or for all crimes since 1990. They include countries in **Africa** (examples include Angola, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Africa), the **Americas** (Canada, Paraguay), **Asia** (Cambodia, Hong Kong, Nepal), **Europe** (Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland) and the **Pacific** (New Zealand).

(Reference: List of Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries)

3. Moves to Reintroduce the Death Penalty

Once abolished, the death penalty is seldom reintroduced. Since 1985, over **35** countries have abolished the death penalty in law or, having previously abolished it for ordinary crimes, have gone on to abolish it for all crimes. During the same period only **four** abolitionist countries reintroduced the death penalty. One of them - Nepal - has since abolished the death penalty again; one, the Philippines, has resumed executions, but there have been no executions in the other two (Gambia, Papua New Guinea).

(Reference: List of Abolitionist and Retentionist Countries)

4. Death Sentences and Executions

During 1998 at least **1,625** prisoners are known to have been executed in **37** countries and **3,899** sentenced to death in **78** countries. These figures include only cases known to Amnesty International; the true figures are certainly higher.

As in previous years, a small number of countries accounted for the vast majority of executions recorded. Amnesty International received reports of **1,067** executions in China, over **100** executions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, **68** executions in the USA and **66** executions in Iran. These four countries alone accounted for **80%** of all executions recorded by Amnesty International worldwide in 1998. Amnesty International also received reports of hundreds of executions in Iraq but was unable to confirm most of these reports.

(Reference: Death Sentences and Executions in 1998, AI Index: ACT 51/01/99)

5. Use of the Death Penalty Against Child Offenders

International human rights treaties prohibit anyone under 18 years old at the time of the crime being sentenced to death. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child all have provisions to this effect. More than **100** countries have laws specifically excluding the execution of child offenders or may be presumed to exclude such executions by being parties

to one or another of the above treaties. A small number of countries, however, continue to execute child offenders.

Six countries since 1990 are known to have executed prisoners who were under 18 years old at the time of the crime - Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, USA and Yemen. The country which carried out the greatest number of known executions of child offenders was the USA (**10** since 1990).

(Reference: *Juveniles and the Death Penalty: Executions Worldwide since 1990*; AI Index: ACT 50/11/98)

6. The Deterrence Argument

Scientific studies have consistently failed to find convincing evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments. The most recent survey of research findings on the relation between the death penalty and homicide rates, conducted for the UN in 1988 and updated in 1996, concluded: "Research has failed to provide scientific proof that executions have a greater deterrent effect than life imprisonment and such proof is unlikely to be forthcoming. The evidence as a whole still gives no positive support to the deterrent hypothesis..."

(References: Roger Hood, *The Death Penalty: A World-wide Perspective*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, revised edition, 1996, p. 238, paragraph 328)

7. Effect of Abolition on Crime Rates

Reviewing the evidence on the relation between changes in the use of the death penalty and crime rates, a study prepared for the UN in 1988 and updated in 1996 stated that "the fact that all the evidence continues to point in the same direction is persuasive *a priori* evidence that countries need not fear sudden and serious changes in the curve of crime if they reduce their reliance upon the death penalty".

Recent crime figures from abolitionist countries fail to show that abolition has harmful effects. In Canada, the homicide rate per 100,000 population fell from a peak of **3.09** in 1975, the year before the abolition of the death penalty for murder, to **2.41** in 1980, and since then it has remained relatively stable. In 1993, 17 years after abolition, the homicide rate was **2.19** per 100,000 population, **27** per cent lower than in 1975. The total number of homicides reported in the country fell in 1993 for the second straight year.

(References: Roger Hood, *The Death Penalty: A World-wide Perspective*, p. 187, paragraph 253; *When the State Kills...*, pp. 11-12)

8. International Agreements to Abolish the Death Penalty

One of the most important developments in recent years has been the adoption of international treaties whereby states commit themselves to not having the death penalty. Three such treaties now exist:

- ! The **Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights**, which has now been ratified by **37** states. **Five** other states have signed the Protocol, indicating their intention to become parties to it at a later date.
- ! The **Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms** (“**European Convention on Human Rights**”), which has now been ratified by **30** European states and signed by **five** others.
- ! **Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights to Abolish the Death Penalty**, which has been ratified by **six** states in the Americas and signed by **one** other.

Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights is an agreement to abolish the death penalty in **peacetime**. The other two protocols provide for the **total abolition** of the death penalty but allow states wishing to do so to retain the death penalty in wartime as an exception.

(Reference: Ratifications of International Treaties on the Death Penalty, AI Index: ACT 50/03/99)

9. Execution of the Innocent

As long as the death penalty is maintained, the risk of executing the innocent can never be eliminated.

Three hundred and fifty people convicted of capital crimes in the USA between 1900 and 1985 were innocent of the crimes charged, according to a 1987 study. Some prisoners escaped execution by minutes, but **23** were actually executed.

A US Congressional report by the House Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights in October 1993 listed **48** condemned men who had been freed from death row since 1972. The report blamed inadequate legal safeguards to prevent wrongful executions and listed numerous inherent flaws in the criminal justice system. The report concluded: "Judging by past experience, a substantial number of death row inmates are indeed innocent, and there is a high risk that some of them will be executed."

10. The Death Penalty in the USA

- ! **68** prisoners were executed in the USA in 1998, bringing to **500** the total number executed since the use of the death penalty was resumed in 1977.
- ! Over **3,500** prisoners were under sentence of death at the end of 1998.
- ! **38** of the 50 US states now provide for the death penalty in law; the death penalty is also provided under US federal military and civilian law.