



International Commission against the Death Penalty
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By Federico Mayor, President, International Commission against the Death Penalty

GENEVA EVENT PUTS DEATH PENALTY IN THE POLITICAL SPOTLIGHT

As the United Nation's Human Rights Council meets in Geneva next week, high-level government officials will gather for a major side event organized by the International Commission against the Death Penalty (ICDP) to assess why and how to abolish, once and for all, a major threat to justice and human rights that has plagued humanity for far too long.

The issue at hand is capital punishment. The event at the Palais des Nations – which will be attended by senior government representatives from Switzerland and other forward-looking nations including Argentina, Norway and Spain, and members of ICDP – is an important occasion because there is no room for complacency.

Globally, the overall trend is firmly towards abolition of the death penalty – but serious challenges remain on the journey to a death penalty free world.

In recent months alone, Afghanistan executed 16 prisoners, India has carried out its first two executions since 2004, and the hanging of a soldier in Pakistan was the first execution there since 2008.

A surge of hangings, mostly for drug related crimes, is underway in Iran, while Saudi Arabia has been carrying out public beheadings at a rate of about two a week, and Yemen has been widely condemned after the execution of two juveniles.

Last year, Japan hanged seven prisoners after almost two years without using the death penalty against its citizens, while in The Gambia nine prisoners lost their lives before a firing squad for the first time since 1981.

Such developments highlight why it is crucial to keep this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment firmly in the international political spotlight. They also serve as a potent reminder why positive international leadership on capital punishment by nations such as Switzerland is so very important.

As President of ICDP – an independent body opposed to executions in all circumstances and led by a group of eminent and influential Commissioners from all world regions – I am delighted that Geneva is hosting our high-level meeting next week.

Switzerland has been a staunch supporter of ICDP since its establishment by the Spanish government in 2010. My fellow ICDP Commissioner Ruth Dreifuss, former President of the Swiss Confederation, will be chairing our event, at which we will also hear from Kyung-wha Kang, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, and receive a message from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon.

Despite the grim developments referred to earlier, our guests will gather knowing that the global campaign for a world free from the death penalty – the ultimate punishment and a violation of the right to life – continues to gather remarkable momentum.

Today more than two-thirds of nations, over 150 countries according to the UN, have now rejected the death penalty or do not carry out executions. As recently as the late 1970s, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes.

These nations have rejected state killing because it is wrong and it is inherently flawed as a tool of criminal justice. Its cruelty, its ineffectiveness as a deterrent to violent crime and its ever-present risk of executing the innocent leave it with no place in a modern and civilized era.

This progress has been accompanied by dramatic developments at the UN. In December 2012, the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly and decisively for a global moratorium on the death penalty.

The vote built on previous resolutions taken by the world body. The General Assembly's first resolution calling for a universal moratorium on capital punishment with a view to abolition was made in 2007, to be reinforced by further resolutions in 2008 and 2010. On each occasion, the vote for a moratorium has gathered strength: steadily rising from 104 votes to 111. Switzerland voted positively on every occasion.

Yet the UN's decisive call is only necessary because of the increasingly isolated behaviour of a relatively small number of nations.

The world's most prolific executioners are China, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the USA. Yet even amongst this hard-core group of executing states, there are signs of hope. Although the USA saw 43 executions last year, public support for capital punishment in the country has dwindled to its lowest levels for nearly four decades.

As more and more countries conclude that capital punishment is an abhorrent practice that does nothing but damage society, the isolation of the minority of countries still clinging to capital punishment is growing all the time.

The hope has to be that the authorities in these countries can show the leadership required to take a bold step into the modern age by immediately suspending use of the death penalty, as a first step towards full abolition.

Federico Mayor is President of the International Commission against the Death Penalty. He is former Director General, UNESCO (1987-1999); Minister of Education and Science, Spain (1981-1982); and Member of European Parliament (1987). ICDP's Commissioners include former presidents, prime ministers, government ministers, senior UN officials, a former US state governor, a former judge and president of the International Court of Justice, and a leading academic. See www.icomdp.org.