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## **International Commission against the Death Penalty**

### **Opinion piece**

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

### **INDONESIA SENTENCE FOR BRITISH GRANDMOTHER HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR ACTION ON DEATH PENALTY**

Just a few short weeks into a new year – a year that will mark the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights – and regrettably a court in Indonesia has sentenced a British grandmother to death.

People across the world have been shocked by the sentencing of 56-year-old Lindsay Sandiford to death for drugs trafficking. The prosecution had recommended a 15-year sentence, with Mrs Sandiford's age and lack of prior convictions being taken into account. Instead, the judges handed down a death sentence. Reports say there was an audible gasp of surprise in the courtroom.

Mrs Sandiford's lawyers have said they will appeal – and as executions rarely now take place in Indonesia, the hope has to be that she will escape the firing squad. The last execution in the country was carried out in 2008.

Her sentence makes particularly uncomfortable global headlines for Indonesia. Only a few weeks ago, another milestone in the campaign for a death penalty free world was reached when the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly and decisively for a global moratorium on the death penalty.

For the first time in such votes, Indonesia abstained rather than voted against the proposal – a move that many human rights advocates saw as welcome progress. This development reflects other positive signs nationally that suggest Indonesia may be moving away from capital punishment.

The UN vote, meanwhile, built on previous resolutions taken by the world body. The General Assembly's first resolution calling for a universal moratorium on the death penalty with a view to abolition, came in 2007, and was then reinforced by further resolutions in 2008 and 2010. On each occasion, the vote for a moratorium has gathered strength: rising from 104 votes to 106, 109 and now 111, with those states voting negatively falling from 54 to just 41.

This is very positive progress, accompanied by a global trend towards abolition that has gathered pace dramatically in recent years. In the late 1970s, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes. 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.

These nations have recognized that state murder – with its inherent cruelty, its ineffectiveness at deterring crime and the ever-present risk of executing the innocent – has no place in modern justice systems.

We, at the International Commission against the Death Penalty, an independent body opposed to capital punishment in all situations and led by a group of high-profile Commissioners from across the world, very much welcome these developments.

However, while the death penalty is clearly on the retreat, the Sandiford case is a potent and high-profile reminder that serious challenges remain.

These challenges include the fact that 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. In the USA, public support for capital punishment has dwindled to its lowest levels for nearly four decades.

The isolation of the minority of countries still clinging to capital punishment is growing all the time, and December's UN vote sent a powerful political and moral message to them that it is time to turn away from this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. If they listen, then perhaps we can dare to imagine a world in which the potential executions of grandmothers convicted of serious yet non-violent crimes have no place.

*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](http://www.icomdp.org).*