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Time to end the myth that the death penalty reduces crime

By Selwyn Strachan

Between 1986 and 1991, I spent 1,715 days on death row at Richmond Hill Prison in Grenada. I was one of 14 people, all of us former government or military officials, had been convicted of murder and sentenced to death by hanging. Our trial had been farcical - Amnesty International called it “manifestly and fundamentally unfair”.

The almost five years I spent on death row were harrowing and horrifying, both physically and psychologically. But most torturous were the final 31 days after a court upheld my conviction on 12 July 1991. Within 72 hours, the prison authorities started preparing the gallows, which were not far from our cells. Imagine being imprisoned, waiting to be hanged, and being able to hear the constant clanging of iron, as workers feverishly prepare the gallows where they intend to kill you.

During the final days, information reached us that the first group of five would be prepared for hanging. One of the five came to my cell to share a few parting words. I vividly recall saying to him, “Don't give up, even at this last moment”.

Thanks to a vigorous international campaign, our death sentences were commuted at the 11th hour and we were sentenced to life imprisonment instead. But in 2009 – after 26 years behind bars – I was finally released. Since that day, I have tried to dedicate my life to campaigning for an end to the death penalty – in Grenada, the Caribbean, and the world.

My main reason for opposing capital punishment is the simple fact that innocent lives could be taken away – and have been – through the death penalty. Not everyone has been as “lucky” as me.

Grenada, and our neighbours in the English-speaking Caribbean, continue to support the death penalty. Although executions are rare – the last one happened in St Kitts and Nevis in December 2008 – the death penalty has not been abolished in law in the region, meaning executions remain a constant threat.

This makes us a minority, bucking the clear global trend that has over the past decades seen the world move steadily away from the death penalty. In 1945, when the UN was created, only eight countries had abolished the death penalty for all crimes – today 140 nations are abolitionist in law or practice. Last year, only 21 of the world's countries carried out executions.

More and more people around the world are coming around to the fact that the death penalty leads to innocent lives being lost, has no deterrent effect on crime, and is a violation of a fundamental human right – the right to life.

In the Caribbean, our leaders often say that the threat of execution is effective in preventing crime because people fear death more than anything else. It's tempting to think of the death penalty as a quick-fix solution to improving public security. This argument has great resonance in our region where many countries face the same challenges – widespread violence and crime, often linked to gangs, and shockingly high homicide rates.

But it's an argument that does not stand up to scrutiny – there is no convincing evidence whatsoever that executions work as a particular deterrent to crime.

The most recent comprehensive UN report on the relationship between the death penalty and homicide rates found no evidence for “the deterrent hypothesis”, while a recent study in Trinidad and Tobago found no link between the use of the death penalty and murder rates. In the greater Caribbean, six of the 10 countries with the highest murder rates all retain the death penalty.

Instead of sticking to the tried, tested and failed “tough on crime” approach – an overreliance on law enforcement and punishment – Caribbean governments need more comprehensive policies that address the root causes of violent crime. This will include tackling police corruption, reducing poverty and inequality, and empowering communities at risk – but definitely not state-sanctioned murder through the death penalty. There is a simple but mighty slogan I like to use – “Stop crimes, not lives!”

Thankfully, I’m far from alone in the region in my campaigning against executions. I’m proud to be part of the Greater Caribbean for Life – a network of anti-death penalty organizations and activists from more 12 countries. In early October, we helped to organize a conference on the death penalty in Trinidad and Tobago – this was just ahead of the international World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October, which this year activists around the world will use to highlight our situation in the Caribbean.

If you couldn’t join us in Trinidad and Tobago, I hope you can at least take this message to heart, join the Greater Caribbean for Life network and help our calls for a full abolition of the death penalty in Grenada and beyond. As the Guyanese attorney Dr Arif Bulkan said recently: “Governments like the death penalty, they like to fall back on it because it looks like you are doing something if you hang people, but in effect you are not achieving anything.”