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### What it takes to make society safer

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Today more than 1,500 cities around the world are illuminating symbolic public buildings in commemoration of the first abolition of the death penalty, which took place in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, in contemporary Italy, on 30 November 1786. The light that characterizes the Cities for Life initiative has an emblematic meaning that goes well beyond the vigils activists have organized. It is a light of hope, which we wish will reach regions where calls for abolition are still contested.

One of these regions is the Caribbean, where violent crime is increasingly casting its shadow over the security of citizens. According to a study by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the number of homicides in the region has increased steadily since 1995, with more than two-thirds of the totality of murders committed using firearms. Most criminal activities in the region are attributed to street gangs and organized crime, and affect particularly deprived and excluded inner-city communities, where unemployment rates are high and access to basic services such as water, electricity and security of housing tenure is often difficult. Young people are particularly at risk of being recruited into gangs.

Across the region, the authorities' responses to crime have shown an over-reliance on law enforcement and punishment, and a reluctance to adopt comprehensive and long-term crime prevention strategies. However, detection and conviction rates, particularly for murder cases, have remained poor. The "tough on crime" measures have so far failed to deliver significant improvements in public security. While crime has risen, the citizens' confidence in the institutions to make society safer has dropped.

And it is in this climate of fear that calls for the resumption of executions are often recorded. While Central and Southern American countries are mostly abolitionists, with Venezuela being the first modern state to have done so in 1863, most Caribbean islands retain the death penalty. However, when looking at the practice, Caribbean Governments' calls for the death penalty seem a populist measure to keep the electorate happy. Flaws in the exercise of due process and systemic failures in the judicial system have meant that death sentences have been frequently overturned. Executions are rare, with the last one being recorded in Saint Kitts and Nevis in 2008, death rows are empty in Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Cuba and Dominica and at least four countries have not passed death sentences since 2005.

Yet support for the death penalty remains strong, and attempts to circumvent regional standards on the death penalty to facilitate executions put the Caribbean at odds with the 140 countries in the world that have abolished the death penalty in law or practice, as well as the Americas' own trend.

While calls for the death penalty are a somewhat understandable expression of suffering from relatives and friends of violent crime victims, we cannot help feeling disconcerted when such calls come from policy-makers. The death penalty has no unique deterrent effect on crime. The death penalty is not the solution. It is an attempt to provide a quick fix to public security concerns.

This is not something only distant experts say. We have heard it very clearly in the words of mothers who had their sons, husbands and sons-in-laws taken away from violent crimes. We have been told this by community workers, prison officials and others who have been working directly against crime. We have heard it in the words of a detainee from a maximum security prison, who discovered there are alternatives to crime only after years in detention, where he was given the opportunity to develop his skills. They all said it is about creating long term solutions and opportunities; it is about preventing children from joining a life of violence; it is about investing in communities. Tackling the root causes of crime and breaking the cycle of violence.

In recent years, voices against the death penalty and in favour of different debate on more sustainable and long terms solutions to crimes have surfaced in the Caribbean, but have remained isolated in the emotional outcry that often follows heinous murders. The Greater Caribbean for Life network was born to connect those voices, to provide a platform to those wanting to offer a different view on the reality of the death penalty in the Greater Caribbean.

And it is with a view to create this much needed space for a different dialogue on the issue of the death penalty and crime, with a focus on the true reality and human rights dimension of capital punishment, that Amnesty International publishes today a report on the death penalty in the English-speaking Caribbean ([LINK](#)). The document highlights key concerns on the use of the death penalty in the region, ranging from unfair trials to the use of the death penalty against individuals with mental disability and voices concerns from stakeholders in the region. Hoping to help light a candle in the dark.