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Participants of the "Walk for Life" in Luneta park, metro Manila, February 2017 © Romeo Ranoco / Reuters

BEYOND CIVIL SOCIETY: HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY

It is not only activists that have driven the global fight to end the death penalty. Professional networks have also played a critical role in mounting opposition to executions, showing that everyone has a role to play in campaigning against the use of this punishment.

Amnesty International's network of health professionals for human rights has been campaigning against the death penalty for decades, addressing in particular the involvement of doctors and nurses in the assessment of prisoners before, during and after the executions are carried out. As medical professionals talking to their counterparts in other countries, they have been able to effectively express concern at the use of medical expertise and equipment for a purpose contrary to what medicine should be used for – saving lives and curing illnesses – and challenge the participation of medical personnel in state executions.

Their work has contributed to the adoption by many medical bodies of declarations affirming that it is unethical for doctors and nurses to participate in the execution process and urging them to actively oppose the involvement of health professionals. These include declarations by the World Medical Association, which first took such a position in 1981. More recently it supported UN calls for a moratorium on executions

Health professionals have also campaigned for states to put in place regulations to ensure that chemicals produced for legitimate medical purposes are not used in lethal injection procedures, and for pharmaceutical companies not to be complicit in the administration of the death penalty. They have joined global efforts against the use of the death penalty on people with mental and intellectual disabilities, and for health assessments to be routinely carried out on those on death row. They have been working with activists and lawyers, offering their medical expertise to support work on behalf of individuals, as well as help us understand the complexities of these aspects of the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment.

ABOLITIONIST REFLECTIONS

On 11 December 1977 Amnesty International and participants of the International Conference on the Abolition of the Death Penalty issued the [Stockholm Declaration](#) – the first international abolitionist manifesto – which called on all governments to bring about the immediate and total abolition of the death penalty.

At the time, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. Forty years on, that figure stands at 105. Let's not make it another 40 years before the death penalty is consigned to history.

A GROWING MOVEMENT FOR ABOLITION

Amnesty International was the first human rights organization to include the abolition of the death penalty in its mandate in the 1970s – something that fills us with pride and respect for those visionaries who took this step. At that time, abolitionist groups had already formed in some countries and civil society and religious representatives in all regions were already vocally opposing the use of this punishment. Several governments and intergovernmental organizations had already begun to raise concern at the use of the death penalty.

It was with the International Conference on the Abolition of the Death Penalty organized by Amnesty International in Stockholm in 1977, however, that all these separate initiatives became connected and a new, global movement began to take shape. The Conference, which involved more than 200 delegates from 50 countries, unequivocally rooted unconditional opposition to the death penalty in the human rights framework and its universal reach – adding a new, important dimension to the public discourse on this often controversial topic.

Since then, the abolitionist movement has grown in numbers and stretch. In May 2002 several organizations including Amnesty International established the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty to coordinate global strategies and work as well as support its members – more than 150 to date, in all regions. Many other actors have also joined the abolitionist effort, ranging from bar associations and academics to criminologists, trade unions, artists, mayors of cities around the world, parliamentarians and many more. Boosted by progressively stronger positions in favour of abolition taken by the United Nations and other regional organizations, the abolitionist movement has thrived and has sometimes served as model to strengthen human rights work in other areas.

With time, our strategies have evolved. We have moved from relying primarily on vigils against executions to also engaging long-term with decision-makers. We have learned that we must never stop exposing the reality of the death penalty even when this has been abolished, because of the ever-present risk that politicians would invoke to bring it back as a "quick-fix" against crime. We have established new dialogues with unlikely champions of abolition, finding that the messenger can be sometimes as important as the message itself.

While never compromising on our desire to see the death penalty eliminated once and for all, we have also walked step-by-step journeys towards abolition, as long as we do not lose sight of the main goal. The challenges are multiple, but we have learned that we find strength in each other's work and perspectives – giving us the confidence that our efforts are bound to succeed.

IN FOCUS – REFLECTIONS FROM ANTI-DEATH PENALTY ACTIVISTS

Hsin-Yi LIN is the Executive Director of the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP). TAEDP has worked with Amnesty International on several cases since its foundation in 2003. It joined the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) in 2006 and the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty (WCADP) in 2007. Hsin-Yi encountered the global anti-death penalty movement for the first time at the 2004 World Congress Against the Death Penalty.

What made you join the abolitionist movement in the first place?

International cooperation. We found that our work benefitted tremendously from interactions and exchanges with international partners. In the early years, being a member of the WCADP or ADPAN helped us a lot, particularly the discussions on growth and strategies. With time, we found that our opinions could help others, too.

Reflecting from your experience, how are we doing now as a movement?

Every country has its own issues and activists on the ground are critical in tackling these. Grass-root activists in retentionist countries are the hardest working people. Our opinions should be respected, including because of our personal involvement. We are the ones who are facing difficult situations and are confronted with the most serious threats. But we are not working alone; we are connected by the movement strategies and cooperation possibilities. It is international cooperation and solidarity that makes us stronger.

If you could change three things that you work on, what would these be?

I would bring about the abolition of the death penalty in Taiwan. Pending this, at least the treatment of prisoners has to be improved to a reasonable level. They are trapped in small prison cells for an extended period of time, without the possibility of working. It is an extreme cruelty. They should be provided with larger spaces and ways of self-realization, or education, rather than just spend all their time waiting for their execution.

Secondly, I hope that the families and children of the death row prisoners could receive care. They, too, just like the victims' family members, are harmed or discriminated against because of crimes they did not commit.

Lastly, the release and retrial order for Cheng Hsing-tse was a good outcome, after the Supreme Court found on 26 October he was wrongfully convicted. I also hope that other cases that we've been working on, such as Chiou, Ho-shun and Hsieh Chih-hong's, will be granted a retrial.

How about your country and region? What is the next frontier?

The Ministry of Justice of Taiwan said it is going to re-launch the "Task Force on Research and Promotion of Gradual Abolition" that it formed previously. We still consider this an opportunity for Taiwan to take steps to abolish the death penalty.

Besides that, TAEDP is kicking-off a new campaign. Next year we plan to hold consultation meetings all over Taiwan for grass-roots activists, as well as specific sessions for experts or influential stakeholders to discuss alternatives to the death penalty. This is because politicians often use low public support for the abolition of the death penalty as an excuse to avoid taking any actions. With appropriate alternatives and understanding, people would not necessarily insist on having the death penalty. We want to show the politicians that they can do a lot more.

A word for Amnesty International activists?

Thank you and please keep up the good work. Your efforts have brought positive results. The cases of exoneration, such as Hsichih Trio and Hsu Tzu-chiang, were successful thanks to your help.

Aurelie Plaçais joined the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty in 2008 and became its Director in 2016. In almost 10 years working for the World Coalition, she has witnessed many countries becoming abolitionist and campaigned for abolitionist states to ratify international treaties on abolition.

What made you join the abolitionist movement in the first place?

I was born two years after France abolished the death penalty in law. I remember very clearly a lesson my teacher taught us at school in 1991, to mark the 10 years of abolition, I could not believe that just over 10 years earlier, France was chopping people's head off with the Guillotine. Over the years, I turned this gut feeling into knowledge and experience. But even now, the more I learn about the death penalty, how arbitrary and unfair it is, the more outraged I am.

Reflecting from your experience, how are we doing now as a movement?

When I started working for the World Coalition, there were about 50 member organizations, most of them from Europe and the USA. The World Coalition is now strong, with more than 150 active members from all over the world. I believe that this diversity is one of our strengths. Geographic diversity, from Trinidad and Tobago to Tanzania and Tajikistan, but also diversity in our expertise and size. The World Coalition is made up of international human rights NGOs such as Amnesty International, but also local grassroots organizations, national coalitions, bar associations and lawyers, university research centers and professors, trade unions and local governments. This diversity is sometimes a challenge, but I believe it is by uniting our forces that we will make worldwide abolition of the death penalty a reality.

If you could change three things that you work on, what would these be?

This is a difficult question. We need more political leadership to drive countries that still have the death penalty to its abolition. The global abolitionist movement needs more funding, at all levels but particularly in countries that still have the death penalty. And we need to work better together – we are a diverse movement and we all bring different expertise and skills to the table. Together we are stronger.

What is the next frontier for the abolitionist movement?

I think the Caribbean is a region where we should focus more efforts. There is a paradox there: while there are fewer people on death row and no executions for almost 10 years, many retentionist countries in the region are very vocal at the international level in favour of the death penalty. The votes from English-speaking Caribbean countries against the UN General Assembly resolutions on a moratorium on the death penalty represent more than one-quarter of all votes against the call for a moratorium. Most of the Caribbean retentionist states have also rejected recommendations by international bodies to reduce the use of or abolish the death penalty.

A word for Amnesty International activists?

We are making a difference, it works and we see it every day. But the road to universal abolition is not straightforward and remains dependent on the men and women who take action every day to remove the death penalty from our world. Keep writing, talking and demonstrating to end this inhumane punishment and together, we will make it happen.