
JOINT STATEMENT

25 June 2025

2025 WORLD DRUG DAY: UNODC AND CND MUST TAKE URGENT ACTION TO END UNLAWFUL USE OF THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES

On the occasion of the 2025 International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, also known as World Drug Day, on 26 June – which also marks the Support. Don't Punish Global Day of Action – we, the undersigned 70 organizations, call on the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) to unequivocally condemn the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences and take concrete steps to ensure that international human rights safeguards restricting the imposition of this cruel punishment are fully implemented, with a view to its full abolition. The continued failure to take a stand against the death penalty by these UN bodies mandated to oversee the development and implementation of international drug policies contributes to a lack of transparency and accountability for these human rights violations, and risks being interpreted as tolerance or even complicity at a critical moment when drug-related executions are in an unprecedented rise.

THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES: EXECUTIONS ON THE RISE IN A HANDFUL OF COUNTRIES

The death penalty is retained for drug-related offences in at least 34 countries. Although official information on the use of the death penalty is not publicly available for many countries, research carried out independently and separately by our organizations indicates that this punishment is mostly imposed for offences related to the cultivation, manufacturing, trafficking or importing/exporting of controlled substances.

Drug-related executions have been increasing in recent years. In 2024, Amnesty International and Harm Reduction International recorded over 600 drug-related executions, which constituted around 40% of total executions globally (1,518) and a 25% increase on the known total executions for these offences in 2023 (508 out of 1,153), making 2024 the deadliest year on record since 2015.¹ These figures show that punitive drug policies have become a significant driver of the use of capital punishment both globally and in many countries individually.

Drug-related executions were known to have been carried out in **four countries** in 2024: **Iran, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and China**. In **China**, official sources confirmed drug-related executions, but state censorship and lack of transparency did not make it possible to establish a credible figure. The authorities of **Iran** carried out approximately 500 executions for drug-related offences in 2024, the majority of executions confirmed nationally, according to figures by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre, Iran Human Rights and others.² These constituted 79% of the known global totals for drug-related executions. In **Saudi Arabia**, the number of drug-related executions (122) constituted 35% of the national total and an alarming rise from the only two recorded in 2023.³ In **Singapore**, eight out of 9 executions carried over the year were drug-related.⁴ Civil society monitoring also suggests that drug-related executions were carried out in the **Democratic People's Republic of Korea** (North Korea) and **Viet Nam**, but could not confirm it due to restrictive state practices.

Amnesty International and Harm Reduction International recorded at least 337 new death sentences known to have been imposed for drug-related offences in at least 13 countries in 2024: Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, and Yemen. In addition to these, Harm Reduction International

¹ Amnesty International, "Death sentences and executions in 2024" (ACT 50/8976/2025), April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>; Harm Reduction International, "The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024" March 2024. <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offences-global-overview-2024/>

² According to monitoring and research by Amnesty International Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre; Harm Reduction International and Iran Human rights.

³ European Saudi Organization for Human Rights, "Blood Era: A Historic Record of Executions in Saudi Arabia 2024", January 2025. https://www.esohr.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Blood_Era_A_Historic_Record_of_Executions_in_Saudi_Arabia_2024.pdf

⁴ Singapore Prison Service, "SPS Annual Statistics Release for 2024", 11 February 2025, <https://www.sps.gov.sg/resource/media-releases/sps-annual-statistics-release-for-2024/>

recorded death sentences for drug-related offences in Egypt, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Thailand. It is estimated that at least 2,300 people were on death row for drug offences in 19 countries at the end of 2024; though actual figures are likely to be significantly higher.

Attempts to discuss or introduce the death penalty as punishment for drug-related offences were also recorded in some countries in 2024, including Fiji, the Maldives, Nigeria and Tonga.

However, recent developments in several Asian countries suggest that, in the long term and with sufficient political will, a significant decrease in the global resort to the death penalty for drug-related offences is possible. Among other examples, in July 2023, **Pakistan** repealed the death penalty for drug-related offences; the first country to do so in over a decade;⁵ and in April 2025, the Ministry of Public Security of **Viet Nam** proposed repealing the death penalty in the Penal Code for eight crimes, including drug trafficking.⁶ The 2023 repeal of the mandatory death penalty **Malaysia** resulted in the commutation of more than 1,000 death sentences, with none of the more than 40 sentences confirmed by the Federal Court relating to drug trafficking.⁷

A CLEAR VIOLATION OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW AND STANDARDS

International human rights law and standards restrict the use of the death penalty to the “most serious crimes”, which do not include drug-related offences. Article 6(2) of the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** and Safeguard No.1 of the **UN Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty**, adopted through UN Economic and Social Council resolution 1984/50, provide that the imposition of the death penalty must be restricted to the “most serious crimes”. The **UN Human Rights Committee** has stated that “The term ‘the most serious crimes’ must be read restrictively and appertain only to crimes of extreme gravity, involving intentional killing. Crimes not resulting directly and intentionally in death, such as [...] drug and sexual offences, although serious in nature, can never serve as the basis, within the framework of article 6, for the imposition of the death penalty. [...]”⁸ In a 2023 report to the UN Human Rights Council, the **Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights** highlighted that “[d]rug-related offences can never serve as the basis for the imposition of the death penalty”.⁹

The three **UN Drug Conventions** do not make any reference to the death penalty, while several UN human rights and drug control bodies have reiterated the total opposition to the death penalty, including for drug related offences. The **UN Common Position on Drugs** has reiterated in unequivocal terms that the application of the death penalty for drug-related offences does not respect the spirit of the UN Drug Conventions and has the potential to become an obstacle to effective cross-border and international cooperation against drug trafficking.¹⁰ The **International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)** has also noted that the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences is in breach of the UN Drug Conventions and a violation of international human rights law, and has called on States that still retain this punishment for drug-related offences to consider abolishing it for such offences and commuting death sentences that have already been imposed.¹¹ More broadly, the INCB has stressed that respect for human rights is a prerequisite for the implementation of the UN Drug Conventions, and that measures adopted with the purported aim of furthering drug policy that are inconsistent with universally recognized human rights norms are a violation of the Conventions.

WORLD DRUG DAY AND THE DEATH PENALTY

World Drug Day is an initiative designed to encourage international cooperation to address the risks and harms of drugs. However, this day has unfortunately been used by various governments to promote highly punitive approaches as the authorities display “zero tolerance” and “iron-fist on drug crime” stances. In some retentionist countries, World Drug Day has been used to support an increased resort to the death penalty or even to ramp up drug-related executions. For example, World Drug Day has been a regular hook for Chinese courts, including the Supreme People’s Court, to issue

⁵ Pakistan today, “Pakistan ends capital punishment for drug trafficking convicts”, 26 July 2023,

<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2023/07/26/pakistan-ends-capital-punishment-for-drug-trafficking-convicts/>

⁶ Viet Nam News, Proposal to remove death penalty for eight crimes in the Penal Code, 8 April 2025, <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/1695403/proposal-to-remove-death-penalty-for-eight-crimes-in-the-penal-code.html> the draft amendments are expected to be considered by the National Assembly in October.

⁷ Amnesty International, “Death sentences and executions in 2024” (ACT 50/8976/2025), p.25.

⁸ Human Rights Committee, General comment No. 36 (2018) on article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the right to life, UN Doc. CCPR/C/ GC/36, 30 October 2018, para.35.

⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Human rights challenges in addressing and countering all aspects of the world drug problem- Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Doc.A/HRC/54/53, 15 August 2023, para.30.

¹⁰ UN Chief Executives Board, “What we have learned over the last ten years: A summary of knowledge acquired and produced by the UN system on drug-related matters”, UN Doc. E/CN.7/2019/CRP.10.

¹¹ Report of the International Narcotics Control Board for 2021, UN DOC. E/ INCB/2021/1, para. 90.

judicial guidelines on how to apply the death penalty for drug-related offences.¹² The authorities of Iran have also reaffirmed on World Drug Day their strong resolve to act as “the flag bearer of the global fight against narco-traffickers and death dealers”.¹³

Meanwhile, the publication of the World Drug Report, launched by UNODC every year on 26 June, presents a unique opportunity for UNODC to publicly condemn the application of the death penalty for drug-related offences and recommend concrete measures that states that still retain this cruel punishment can implement to align their domestic policies with international human rights law and standards.

Our organizations reiterate our call on all international drug control mechanisms, including the CND and UNODC, to consistently incorporate death penalty abolition (and human rights more generally) into their work, including in connection with the World Drug Day.¹⁴ In particular, we urge the CND to establish a standing item in its agenda to address the human rights impacts of drug policies; and for UNODC to ensure that human rights are part of its constant monitoring work, including through the inclusion of a specific chapter on human rights in its yearly World Drug Report.

The continued and unequivocal public condemnation by UNODC and the CND of the use of the death penalty for drug-related offences would be critical, in the long term, to change the perception of this issue and foster a context for discussions that puts the protection of human rights at the core of international and national drug control policies.

This statement is co-signed by:

ACAT Germany (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture)

ACEID (Costa Rica)

Africa Network of People Who Use Drugs [AfricaNPUD]

AILV-Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League

ALQST for Human Rights

Amnesty International

Añadir REPECAP - Academicsforabolition. Spain

Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network

Association for Humane Drug Policy, Norway

Capital Punishment Justice Project

Center of Legal and Social Studies (CELS)

Colegio de Abogados y Abogadas de Puerto Rico

Corporación Acción Técnica Social - Colombia

Corporación Viso Mutop- Colombia

Corporación Viviendo

DITSHWANELO - The Botswana Centre for Human Rights

Drug Policy Alliance

DRUGZ (<https://drugz.fr/> ; France)

¹² Amnesty International, China: Annual execution spree looms on UN anti-drugs day, 25 June 2004, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/asa170262004en.pdf>; Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, Courts remain committed to handing down heavy punishment for drug-related crimes, 27 June 2023, https://english.court.gov.cn/2023-06/27/c_897735.htm; Legal Information, The Supreme Court has released 10 typical cases (最高法发布 10 件毒品犯罪典型案例), 26 June 2024, http://legalinfo.moj.gov.cn/zhfxfzxfzzyw/202406/t20240626_501176.html

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Foreign Ministry spokesman: Iran flag-bearer of fighting narco-traffickers, 26 June 2024, <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/748605/Foreign-Ministry-spokesman-Iran-flag-bearer-of-fighting-narco-traffickers>

¹⁴ Among other examples, Amnesty International, "World Drugs Day: UNODC must integrate ending drug related executions in its work", (ACT 50/4347/2021), 26 June 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACT5043472021ENGLISH.pdf>

drustvo AREAL (Slovenia)
ECPM (Together against the death penalty)
Elementa - Colombia and Mexico
European Network of People who Use Drugs (EuroNPUD)
European Saudi Organization for Human Rights
Groupement Romand d'Études des Addictions (GREA), Switzerland
German Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (GCADP)
HUMANITY DIASPO
Human Rights Dallas
Hands off Cain
Harm Reduction International
Harm Reduction Malta
Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA)
HAYAT
Health and Opportunity Network (HON)
HIV Legal Network, Canada
IDUCARE, Philippines
Indonesian Drug Policy Reform Network (Jaringan Reformasi Kebijakan Narkotika)
Institute for the Rule of Law of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA-IROL)
Instituto RIA, AC (México)
Intercambios Puerto Rico
International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research and Service (ICEERS), Spain
International Commission of Jurists
International Drug Policy Consortium (IDPC)
International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD)
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
Iran Human Rights (IHRNGO)
Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC)
The Kenyan Section of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ Kenya)
Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Masyarakat
lifepark (Switzerland) - movement against the death penalty
MADPET (Malaysians Against Death Penalty and Torture)
Mainline (Netherlands)
Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)
Menahra
MANAS (Portugal)
Mantes la Galette (France)
My Brain My Choice Initiative (Germany)

Organisation for the Prevention of Intense Suffering (OPIS)
Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA)
Release (UK)
Reprieve
Responsible Business Initiative for Justice
Skoun, Lebanese Addictions Center
Southern Methodist University Human Rights Program
StoptheDrugWar.org (US)
Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty
Transnational Institute (TNI)
WHRIN
Witness to Innocence
Women Beyond Walls
World Coalition Against the Death Penalty