

JOINT STATEMENT: INCB REPORT LAUNCH AND THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES

New UN report highlights ongoing conflicts on the death penalty for drugs: As countries ramp up executions, UN drugs meeting in Vienna to be scene of heightened debate

3rd March 2015 - A new UN report on the global drug situation has highlighted the widening rift between countries on the issue of the death penalty for drug offences. These tensions are set to surface as Member States convene in Vienna next week at the annual meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the UN policy making body on drug control issues.

The Annual Report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), released today, calls upon States that ‘continue to impose the death penalty for drug-related offences to consider abolishing the death penalty for such offences’.

The statement comes just a week before the annual meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the UN policy making body on drug control issues, and underscores an issue that has become increasingly volatile among members of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in recent years. Indeed, attempts to craft a joint resolution on drugs at last year’s meeting nearly fell apart amidst heated debates between Member States on including language against the death penalty.

The death penalty for drugs looks to again be a major point of contention at the 2015 Commission meeting next week. A recent spate of executions in Indonesia has turned the world’s attention to the practice, with the killings of Dutch and Brazilian nationals prompting those governments to recall their Ambassadors from Jakarta. It remains to be seen how these diplomatic tensions will influence the States’ relations during the Commission meeting.

But it is not just Indonesia’s actions that are bringing these tensions to the fore. A number of other countries have demonstrated a renewed enthusiasm for executing drug offenders over the past year: Iran has escalated drug related hangings, Pakistan has resumed executions and Oman has proposed to introduce capital punishment for drug crimes. A protest to end the use of the death penalty for drugs will take place outside UN headquarters in Vienna during the Commission meeting.

The statement from the INCB -- a body of independent experts that monitors the implementation of the international drug control treaties -- reinforces a similar call the group made one year ago, which added its voice to those of other UN authorities, including the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), who have called for ending the death penalty for drug offences.

Ironically, although the UNODC has publicly spoken out against the death penalty for drug offences, the agency has been linked to funding aggressive anti-trafficking operations in several death penalty States, and a number of donor governments have publicly acknowledged the link between UNODC counter-narcotics funding and death sentences. In recent years the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland all resolved to end funding UNODC programmes in certain countries while the death penalty is still enforced.

Dr Rick Lines, Executive Director of Harm Reduction International, said:

“The death penalty for drug offences represents the sharp end of the world’s failed war on drugs, disproportionately punishing the vulnerable while failing to tackle entrenched forces of crime and corruption. We welcome the growing number of UN bodies willing to condemn this unjust and ineffective punishment, but these positive sentiments must be backed by effective action if we are to stem the rising tide of states seeking to put drug offenders to death.”

“The first step must surely be for the UN to refuse to fund anti-drug operations in states which maintain the death penalty for drug offences; and instead use this money to tackle the health, social and human rights impacts of drug use.”

A side event organised during the Commission meeting by the NGOs Reprive, Harm Reduction International and the International Drug Policy Consortium will specifically examine links between international and UN aid and death sentences and executions for drug offences.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Reprive, HRI, IDPC, Transform, Release, Espolea, Andrey Rylkov Foundation, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Drug Policy Alliance, Forum Droghe, and Diogenis Association note that:

1. Reports suggest that in January 2015 **Iran** hanged at least fifty drug offenders, many in large groups, undermining claims by its human rights council that it is considering ending the death penalty for drug offences. Since 1979, Iran has executed at least 10,000 alleged drug traffickers caught by the Anti-Narcotics Police, and in 2014 more than 300 alleged drug offenders were hanged. 70-80% of Iranian executions in the last 5 years were for alleged drug offences, making the death penalty for drug offences the principal factor in Iran's world-leading per-capita execution rate.
2. **Pakistan** brought an end to its 6 year death penalty moratorium in December 2014, risking the lives of at least 112 drug offenders apprehended with UNODC support. The Pakistani Government has argued that it will only execute "terrorists", but recent weeks have seen a number of people executed who committed no terrorist offences and were never tried in one of the country's terrorism courts. As the vast majority of alleged "terrorists" on Pakistan's death row committed crimes which bear no relation to terrorism (such as involuntary manslaughter), it is very likely that there are drug offenders among the 500 people slated for execution in the coming weeks.
3. **Indonesia's** recently inaugurated President Joko Widodo has recently resumed executions in the country, prioritising drug offence cases. The President has in fact announced that there will be "no clemency for drug traffickers." Six such offenders were executed in January so far, four of whom were foreigners, and a further 30 or so prisoners are slated to face the firing squad in the coming months. The executions went ahead despite extremely high-level diplomatic representations from, in particular, the Dutch, Brazilian, Australian and French governments and international pressure to change course.
4. In June 2014 **Oman's** State Council backed proposals to introduce the death penalty for drug dealers in the country. Reports suggest the proposal is now being "discussed at a higher level" before being incorporated into law.