



Media Release

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Governments that kill for drugs are an extreme fringe of the international community: Report

Death penalty for drugs increasing in Iran and Indonesia as numbers decline in significantly in China, says new Global Report, launched ahead of the 13th World Day Against the Death Penalty: Drug Crimes

Vast majority of 550 executions occurring in China, Iran and Saudi Arabia against a backdrop of increased pressure from UN member states and multilateral institutions to dismantle capital drug laws

8 October, 2015 (London, UK)-- The number of people executed for drug-related offences remains high at an estimated 550 people per year but only because a small number of countries who account for the majority of those deaths - China, Iran and Saudi Arabia – are aggressive executioners, according to a new report released today by Harm Reduction International (HRI). Of the approximately 549 executions for drugs believed to have taken place in 2013, 546 were carried out in those three countries.

The report, [Death Penalty for Drug Offences 2015](#), is the fourth edition published by HRI since 2007 and coincides with both the 13th World Day Against the Death Penalty taking place on October 10 and the [24th International Harm Reduction Conference](#) being held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia October 18-21. (1) The report publishes the latest round of execution and death row statistics for the 33 countries and territories that prescribe the death penalty for drugs in law.

In recent years there has been growing dissent with the Global Drug Control system and Member States and International Agencies like the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) are increasing pressure on those rogue states that carry out executions in violation of international law. The issue will be scrutinised at the [United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Drugs](#) to take place in New York in April 2016.

The death penalty for drugs is distinct from many other capital punishment issues as drug control is not confined to the borders of a particular country. In recent years, a number of governments implemented guidelines that potentially limit cooperation with drug control agencies in countries that carry out illegal executions. Even more importantly, several states have withdrawn drug control aid over death penalty concerns, illustrating how seriously the issue is being taken.

“Governments that kill for drugs represent an extremist fringe of the international community,” said Rick Lines, Executive Director of Harm Reduction International and co-author of the report. “Those



countries executing drug offenders, particularly in large numbers, make up a tiny minority of countries in the world. They are even more extreme than other minority of countries that also have the death penalty for drugs in their national legislation, but most of whom don't actually execute people in practice."

The report notes that the decline in overall numbers of people being executed for drug offence, from around a 1000 to 600 reflects what many believe to be a dramatic decrease in the number of all executions in China, perhaps indicating some pattern of internal re-evaluation by authorities in that country.(2) However, it also notes that determining accurate global figures on executions for drug offences is extremely difficult given the secrecy with which some key States treat such information.

However, the report also notes an apparent change in policy in Indonesia which traditionally has had many drug offenders on death row rarely executed. Between 2007 through 2012, two drug offenders had been executed. That changed in 2013 when the government executed five people, two of whom were convicted of drug offences. In 2015 the government carried out mass executions of drug offenders, some of them amidst huge media attention and widespread criticism from world leaders.

Drug offences have long comprised the majority of executions in Iran and continue to do so. While executions for murder appeared to be growing in recent years, Iran Human Rights' latest report notes that in the first six months of 2015 there were an estimated 570 executions, of which 394 people (69 percent) were drug offenders.

Other highlights of the report include:

- There are at least **33 countries and territories that prescribe the death penalty for drugs in law**;
- At least **10 countries have the death penalty for drugs as a mandatory sanction**;
- **In 2013, around 549 people were believed to have been executed for drugs**. This is an estimate using figures provided by human rights monitors but it cannot be considered comprehensive and it is likely there are more executions than those recorded;
- If the estimates for China are accurate and remained constant for 2014, then there would have been at least **600 executions for drugs in 2014**. The actual figure is also likely to be higher when countries like North Korea, for which there is no reliable data, are included;
- **Executions for drugs took place in at least seven countries since 2010**. This number is possibly higher but not by much. Very few countries in the world actually execute drug offenders with any frequency;
- As of 2015, there are believed to be almost **900 people on death row** for drugs in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Pakistan, and many hundreds more in China, Iran and Vietnam;



- At least 12 countries or territories that prescribe the death penalty for drugs in law are not known to have ever executed a single person for a drug offence;
- Six countries that prescribe the death penalty for drugs in law are 'abolitionist in practice' meaning 'executions have not taken place for 10 years' or a formal moratorium has been issued.

The report is also critical of Malaysian the secrecy surrounding the Malaysian Government's death penalty policies. While the numbers of executions for drugs that become public are relatively few, no figures can be seen as comprehensive.

"Governments must increase transparency on their use of the death penalty," said Lines. "Keeping information on executions secret exposes arguments about any alleged deterrent effect of the death penalty as false. How can governments seriously suggest the death penalty is a deterrent when they refuse to disclose how, when and for what offences it is used?"

Notes to Editors:

(1) The International Harm Reduction Conference will feature a special focus on the death penalty, debate in the Asia Pacific region featuring the participation of leading activists and lawyers from countries such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. There will also be significant focus on the issue of a global harm reduction funding shortfall: HRI is running its [10 by 20 campaign](#), calling on governments to redirect 10 per cent of the resources that they currently spend on ineffective punitive responses to drugs towards harm reduction by 2020.

(2) In the past, Harm Reduction International estimated that as many as a thousand people were executed each year for drugs. The decline in the estimates above reflects what many believe to be a dramatic decrease in the number of executions in China. The Dui Hua Foundation believes China executes fewer people each year now than in 2008, 2009 and 2010. In fact, the Foundation estimates that executions fell from 6,500 in

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About Harm Reduction International (HRI)



Harm Reduction International is a leading non-governmental organisation working to promote and expand support for harm reduction. With over 8,000 members worldwide, Harm Reduction International is the largest membership-based global harm reduction association. HRI works to reduce the negative health, social and human rights impacts of drug use and drug policy – such as the increased vulnerability to HIV and hepatitis infection among people who inject drugs – by promoting evidence-based public health policies and practices, and human rights based approaches to drug policy.

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