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TOOL OF FEAR: EXECUTIONS ON THE RISE AS DEATH PENALTY USED TO SHOW HEAVY HAND OF THE STATE

On the occasion of the 23rd World Day Against the Death Penalty on 10 October 2025, Amnesty International joins the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty and other abolitionist activists and organizations in denouncing the continued use of the death penalty and encouraging actions in support of its full abolition.

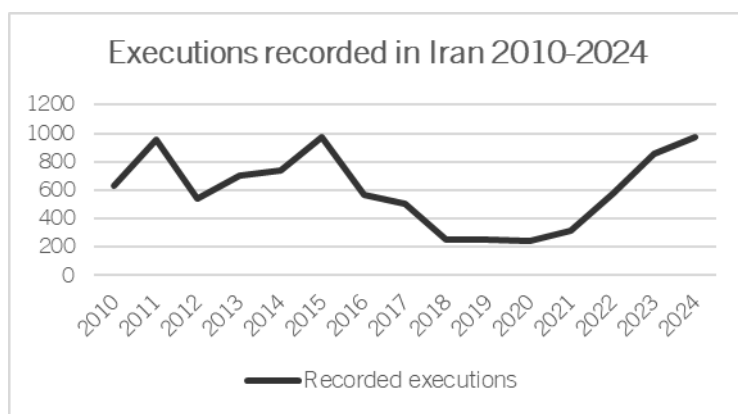
Trends recorded so far in 2025 indicate that executions have significantly increased in some countries, when compared to figures registered in recent years. Among these rises, some governments have shown renewed determination to use this cruel punishment as a tool of repression and control. This has frequently happened in the context of flawed narratives intended to create a false impression of security through a display of heavy-handed responses from the state, and to score political points. These narratives have also fostered a flagrant disregard for safeguards and restrictions under international human rights law and standards that have been established to protect people facing execution from being arbitrarily deprived of their lives.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception. As progress towards abolition has also been recorded in some countries this year, Amnesty International renews its call on all states that still retain this punishment to immediately establish a moratorium on executions and take prompt steps towards its full abolition.

1. ALARMING RISES IN EXECUTIONS IN SEVERAL COUNTRIES INCREASING ARBITRARINESS

Global execution totals recorded by Amnesty International every year have been on a constant rise since the historical-low figures registered during the Covid-19 pandemic. In more recent years – and more so in recent months – the use of the death penalty has been increasing in a global context marked by insecurity, political and economic instability and, in some countries, military operations. Among a broader weakening of the rule of law and respect for international human rights law and standards, the recent increases in executions expose both the arbitrariness of the death penalty and the politicization of its use.

Recorded executions have soared in several countries in the first nine months of 2025, with yearly totals in some states having already surpassed – or even doubled – the respective 2024 totals.



As of end of September 2025, the **Iranian** authorities have executed more than 1,000 people, overtaking the grim total of 972 executions recorded in 2024. This is the highest number of yearly executions that Amnesty International has recorded for this country in at least 15 years.¹

The authorities of **Saudi Arabia** have also carried out executions at a higher rate this year, and are likely to exceed the record-high total of 2024 (at least 345).²

The 34 executions carried out in 10 **US** states in the first nine months of 2025 represent an increase by more than a third compared to 2024 (25). The authorities of Florida, whose Governor Ron DeSantis

has been a staunch advocate of the death penalty, are primarily responsible for the alarming rise in the national total,

¹ Amnesty International, "Iran: Over 1,000 people executed as authorities step up horrifying assault on right to life", 26 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/09/iran-over-1000-people-executed-as-authorities-step-up-horrifying-assault-on-right-to-life/>

² Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: New report denounces alarming escalation in executions including of foreign nationals convicted of drug-related offences", 7 July 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/07/saudi-arabia-escalation-executions-foreign-nationals-drug-related-offences/>

accounting for 13 executions.³ As tracked by the Death Penalty Information Centre, an additional nine execution warrants were active as of 30 September 2025.⁴ This could result in the USA reaching its highest yearly execution total in more than a decade, equaling the figures of 2011 and 2012 (43 in each year). Of further concern is that the Department of War has begun the process to resume military executions for the first time in more than six decades.⁵

Reports gathered by Amnesty International further indicate that the authorities in **Kuwait** have almost tripled their 2024 total (six), with at least 17 people hanged between January and September 2025, including at least two people for drug-related offences. The **Singapore** government has also surpassed its 2024 figure (9) by hanging 12 men as of 8 October, with several others believed to be at imminent risk of execution.⁶

Three countries have resumed executions so far in 2025: the government of **Japan** carried out its first execution in nearly three years in June;⁷ **Taiwan** saw in January its first hanging since 2020;⁸ and the authorities of the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) carried out in February their first known executions since 2021.⁹

Figures on the use of the death penalty in **China**, **North Korea** and **Viet Nam** remain shrouded in secrecy, but reports gathered by Amnesty International indicate that the resort to the death penalty in these countries continued to be sustained and estimated executions to be in the thousands in China alone.

International law and standards have long established abolition as the goal to be achieved in countries that still retain the death penalty. This abolitionist vision renders increases in the use of this punishment inconsistent with the protection of the right to life.¹⁰ States that have not yet abolished the death penalty can only apply it in a manner that is not arbitrary.¹¹

Concerningly, the use of the death penalty has been increasingly politicized in recent months in a way that has been increasing its arbitrariness. This has taken two main manifestations: one linked to repression of dissent and another to flawed narratives on security and the intention of the state to show a heavy hand against crime.

2. DEATH PENALTY AS A TOOL TO CRUSH POLITICAL DISSENT

In some countries, governments have been pursuing the death penalty as a tool for political repression, with a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, to control the population by instilling fear or to give a false impression of security and strong government. In recent years, the **Iranian** authorities increased their use of the death penalty to punish individuals who challenged, or were perceived as having challenged, the Islamic Republic establishment during the Woman Life Freedom uprising of September-December 2022. Since then, authorities have arbitrarily executed at least 11 people in connection to the Woman Life Freedom uprising, including Mojahed (Abbas) Kourkouri in June 2025, who was sentenced to death following a grossly unfair trial by a Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz.¹² Several others arrested in connection with the protests remain under sentence of death.

³ Independent, "DeSantis set a Florida record for executions. It's driving a national increase", 2 August 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ron-desantis-florida-donald-trump-supreme-court-tallahassee-b2800743.html>

⁴ Death Penalty Information Centre, "Outcomes of Death Warrants in 2025", last updated on 30 September 2025, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/upcoming-executions/outcomes-of-warrants/outcomes-of-death-warrants-in-2025>

⁵ Fox News, "Pentagon seeks Trump approval for first US military execution in 60 years following Fort Hood mass shooting", 24 September 2025, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pentagon-seeks-trump-approval-first-us-military-execution-60-years-fort-hood-mass-shooting>

⁶ Amnesty International, "Singapore: Further information: Risk of execution after appeal denied: Pannir Selvam Pranthaman (ASA 36/0281/2025)", 11 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa36/0281/2025/en/>; Amnesty International, Singapore: Cruel and unlawful drug-related execution of Malaysian man renews urgency for moratorium on executions (ACT 50/0341/2025), 27 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/0341/2025/en/>

⁷ Amnesty International, Japan: Cruel execution a stain on country's human rights record, 27 June 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/japan-cruel-execution-a-stain-on-countrys-human-rights-record/>

⁸ Amnesty International, Taiwan: First execution since 2020 a shameful setback, 16 January 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/taiwan-first-execution-since-2020-a-shameful-setback/>

⁹ The Hindu, Two of three Indian nationals executed in UAE buried, says MEA, 6 March 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/burial-of-executed-up-woman-conducted-in-abu-dhabi/article69298917.ece>

¹⁰ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 – Article 6: right to life, UN Doc.CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para.50.

¹¹ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 – Article 6: right to life, UN Doc.CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para.12; report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (2014), UN Doc. A/69/265, para.102-103.

¹² Amnesty International, "Iran: Further Information: Risks of Further Protest-Related Executions" (Urgent Action, MDE 13/8873/2024), 19 December 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8873/2024/en/>

The authorities have also punished human rights defenders and dissidents by death. Among others, women's rights activist Sharifeh Mohammadi was sentenced to death in June 2024;¹³ at least two Kurdish women, humanitarian aid worker Pakhshan Azizi and dissident Verisheh Moradi, are also under a death sentence and at risk of execution.¹⁴

Under the guise of national security, the Iranian authorities intensified their use of the death penalty in the aftermath of the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Iran, following Israeli military strikes against Iran in June 2025. Senior officials, including the Head of Judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni Eje'i, have called for expedited trials and executions for "supporting" or "collaborating" with hostile states, including Israel. Iran's parliament also passed legislation expanding the use of the death penalty, including for vaguely-worded national security charges, such as "cooperation with hostile governments", and "espionage". The bill was approved by the Guardian Council on 1 October 2025 and must now be signed by the president to take effect. Since 13 June 2025, at least 18 men have been executed on politically-motivated charges, including at least 15 who the authorities accused of espionage for Israel.¹⁵

This increased repression has relied extensively on grossly unfair trials by Revolutionary Courts, which exercise jurisdiction over national security and drug-related offences. These courts lack independence, operate under the influence of security and intelligence bodies and routinely rely on torture-tainted forced "confessions" to issue convictions and death sentences. Reliance on overly broad and vaguely defined charges of "enmity against God" (*moharebeh*), "corruption on earth" (*efsad-e fel-arz*), and "armed rebellion against the state" (*baghi*) have also led to scores being at risk of execution following grossly unfair trials and after convictions on politically-motivated charges. In this context, the use of the death penalty has disproportionately impacted marginalized minorities, particularly those belonging to the Afghan, Baluchi, and Kurdish communities. Violations of the right to a fair trial, as recognized under international law and standards, resulting in the imposition of the death penalty render the death sentences arbitrary in nature.¹⁶

In **Saudi Arabia**, members of the historically marginalized Shia religious minority who have long faced discrimination have also been significantly impacted by the use of the death penalty. In the wake of the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, thousands of men and women belonging to the Shia minority rose in protests in the country's Eastern Province. Their calls for political, economic, and social reforms; for the release of hundreds of people from their community who had been arbitrarily detained without charge or trial; and for an end to systemic discrimination against the Shia community, including unequal access to employment, were met by repression by the Saudi authorities. The prosecutions and death sentences in connection to these anti-government protests led to a sharp increase of executions of members of the Shia minority for overly-broad "terrorism"-related offences. Between January 2022 and June 2025, Saudi Arabia executed 183 people for "terrorism"-related offences, including 74 members of the Shia community (40.4%), which comprises an estimated 10-12% of the total population.¹⁷

Several children have been affected by the death penalty in these flawed prosecutions, including Abdullah al-Derazi who is at imminent risk of execution. He was arrested in 2014 while he was 17 years old for protesting against the treatment of the Shi'a minority in al-Qatif. He was convicted and sentenced to death after a grossly unfair trial for his alleged participation in violent attacks and possession of illegal weapons during anti-government protests in 2011 and 2012. During his trial, he told the court he was held in pretrial detention for three years, during which he had no access to legal representation, and was tortured into "confessing". The court failed to investigate his torture allegations and an appeals court upheld his death sentence on 8 August 2022.¹⁸ The use of the death penalty on those who were below 18 years of age at the time of the offence is absolutely prohibited under international law.¹⁹

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** (DRC), the number of death sentences imposed has soared in recent months, while the government has repeatedly threatened to restart executions as a justification for the need to combat "treason" within the army.²⁰ Former President Joseph Kabila was sentenced to death without being present (in absentia) by a

¹³ Amnesty International, "Iran: Woman Rights Defender at Risk of Execution: Sharifeh Mohammadi" (Urgent Action, MDE 13/8506/2024), 9 September 2024 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/8506/2024/en/>

¹⁴ Amnesty International, "Iran: Further Information: Thousands at risk of execution in Iran" (MDE 13/0277/2025), 10 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/0277/2025/en/>

¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Iran: Over 1,000 people executed as authorities step up horrifying assault on right to life", 26 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/09/iran-over-1000-people-executed-as-authorities-step-up-horrifying-assault-on-right-to-life/>

¹⁶ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 – Article 6: right to life, UN Doc.CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para.41.

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: 'If We Had Money and a Lawyer, Maybe My Brother Would Be Alive' - Saudi Arabia's Execution Crisis" (MDE 23/9524/2025), 7 July 2025, pp.45-48, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/9524/2025/en/>

¹⁸ Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia: Young Man at Imminent Risk of Execution: Abdullah al-Derazi", 1 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/0244/2025/en/>

¹⁹ Article 37(a) of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; see also Amnesty International, "The Exclusion of Child Offenders from the Death Penalty under General International Law" (Index: ACT 50/004/2003), 17 July 2003, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT50/004/2003/en/>

²⁰ Amnesty International, "Democratic Republic of the Congo: Alarming increase in death sentences as government threatens to resume executions" (AFR 62/8938/2025), 22 January 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/8938/2025/en/>; "DRC: Warring factions in eastern DRC commit

military court on 30 September 2025, after he was found guilty of treason, murder, sexual assault, torture and insurrection in relation to his alleged support for the M23 group backed by Rwanda, charges that he denied.²¹ Military courts are frequently used in the DRC to try and sentence civilians to death, in breach of international fair trial standards.²²

Moreover, the DRC has also pursued the death penalty against Gradi Koko Lobanga and Navy Malela, two whistleblowers who exposed a sophisticated money-laundering network allegedly implicating their former employer and a sanctioned mining magnate.²³ The revelations, shared with the Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa (PPLAAF) and Global Witness, set off investigative reports on how networks linked to the mining magnate moved millions of US dollars out of the DRC, at the time under US sanctions. Instead of launching a genuine probe, those exposed orchestrated a ruthless retaliation against those who exposed allegations of wrongdoing.²⁴ In September 2020, in a trial that has been called by observers as deeply flawed, Gradi Koko Lobanga and Navy Malela were sentenced to death in absentia without being present or properly informed of the charges.²⁵ To date, no appeal has been filed on their behalf.

3. DEATH PENALTY TO SHOW STRONG HAND OF THE STATE AMONG FLAWED SECURITY NARRATIVES

3.1 Flawed security narratives and “scapegoating”

The second element that has characterized an increased politicized use of death penalty in recent months relates to the promotion of flawed narratives around security, intended to project an image of strong government. In this context, particularly in countries where those in power have been expanding authoritarian practices and closing civic space, the death penalty has been portrayed as an effective and necessary tool to protect public safety. Yet, in many instances, the death penalty has been instead used as a way to exert control over the population and give a false impression of security and strong government, often to score political points. This approach has not only deliberately ignored the human rights violations that have long been documented in the use of the death penalty in those countries, but also has had the effect of delegitimizing the international human rights law and standards framework.

The promotion of the death penalty in the context of these flawed security narratives has particularly driven dangerous and dehumanizing “scapegoating” descriptions of risks, in which specific groups – which are often among the most marginalized sectors of the population – have been identified as threatening public security, political and economic stability, cultural identities or exclusivist understandings of “morals” of those in power.

Among other examples, on 5 January 2025, the Minister of Justice of the **DRC** Constant Mutamba announced that more than 170 people, allegedly linked to criminal groups commonly known as “Kulana” or “bandits”, had been transferred from the capital Kinshasa to Angenga prison in north-west DRC for execution, under the ill-conceived assumption that the death penalty would end deadly violence in several cities.²⁶

In **Iran**, the number of Afghans executed in 2024 rose significantly compared to 2023 (from 25 to 80), with around half executed for drug-related offences. This rise coincided with the escalation of hateful and dehumanizing language towards Afghan nationals, which has continued in 2025. After the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Iran in June 2025, Iranian officials, who have historically referred to Afghans as “foreigners” or “unauthorized nationals”, intensified their use of racist, xenophobic and dehumanizing rhetoric against this community amid an unprecedented wave of forced mass expulsions of Afghans, including those born and living in Iran for decades, to Afghanistan. Authorities have also made unsubstantiated accusations against Afghans alleging “espionage” for Israel. Scores have been arrested since 14 June 2025 on such accusations, and state media has aired the forced “confessions” of several.²⁷

horrific abuses including gang rapes, summary executions and abductions”, 20 August 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/08/drc-warring-factions-in-eastern-drc-commit-horrific-abuses-including-gang-rapes-summary-executions-and-abductions/>

²¹ Deutsche Welle, “Congo: Death sentence for former leader Joseph Kabila”, 30 September 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/congo-death-sentence-for-former-leader-joseph-kabila/a-74192092>

²² UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 – Article 6: right to life, UN Doc.CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para.45.

²³ PPLAAF, “DRC – Extremely serious attacks on whistleblowers, the press and civil society”, 4 March 2021, <https://www.pplaaf.org/2021/03/04/drc-serious-attack-on-whistleblowers.html>

²⁴ Amnesty International, “Democratic Republic of the Congo: 146 organisations condemn lawsuit brought by Dan Gertler against the Congo is Not for Sale anti-corruption coalition” (AFR 62/6699/2023), 17 April 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/6699/2023/en/>

²⁵ Amnesty International, “Death sentences and executions in 2020” (ACT 50/3760/2021), p.51.

²⁶ Amnesty International, “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Alarming increase in death sentences as government threatens to resume executions” (AFR 62/8938/2025), 22 January 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr62/8938/2025/en/>

²⁷ Amnesty International, “Iran: Further Information: Thousands at risk of execution in Iran” (MDE 13/0277/2025), 10 September 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/0277/2025/en/>

In the **USA**, where the federal government has increased the use of authoritarian practices such as the domestic deployment of the US military, heavy-handed enforcement against migrants and curtailing of freedom of expression and civic space, President Donald Trump has repeatedly promoted the use of the death penalty in the name of security, emboldening its supporters in a way that is having a ripple-effect across the country.²⁸ In late 2024, as President Trump prepared to take office, he repeatedly invoked the death penalty as a tool to protect people “from violent rapists, murderers, and monsters”.²⁹ Although not altering existing US federal laws, 2025 directives issued by President Trump on the death penalty have used inflammatory language towards those accused of committing serious crimes against “American citizens”; attacked judges that have not supported the death penalty as constitutional; and aimed at giving the impression of zero tolerance on crime.³⁰

3.2 Disinformation on crime and deterrence hypothesis of the death penalty

These flawed security narratives have contributed to the spread of disinformation on crime and on the false claim that the death penalty has a unique deterrent effect. For example, a directive issued by US President Trump in September to seek the death penalty in all eligible cases in Washington, DC came shortly after the deployment of the national guard to the District to tackle an alleged security crisis, even though homicide trends rates have been declining.³¹

There is no convincing evidence to support the argument that the death penalty has a unique deterrent effect. The most comprehensive survey of research findings carried out by the UN on the relationship between the death penalty and homicide rates concluded: “research has failed to provide scientific proof that executions have a greater deterrent effect than life imprisonment. Such proof is unlikely to be forthcoming. The evidence as a whole still gives no positive support to the deterrent hypothesis.”³²

Disinformation on the death penalty has been frequently justified by favourable public opinion polls. However, these arguments not only ignore human rights violations associated with the use of the death penalty, but also hide the responsibility of governments to inform the public about the impact of this cruel punishment on crime and enjoyment of human rights. The methodological validity of opinion polls in determining the support for the death penalty has long been challenged.³³

In **Japan**, the government resumed executions in June 2025 arguing it was necessary to ensure public safety and combat crime. The resumption followed the acquittal in September 2024 of Hakamada Iwao, described as the world’s longest-serving death row prisoner, which laid bare the unfairness of Japan’s criminal justice system and use of the death penalty. Instead of moving to address the systemic issues at the root of this injustice, the government continued to defend the use of the death penalty. Following the resumption of execution, the Minister of Justice defended the retention of the death penalty at a press conference making reference to a government opinion poll of late 2024 where, according to him, “is clear that the majority of the population feel that the death penalty is necessary” and confirmed that there are currently no plans to abolish it.³⁴

However, by their continued justification of executions in the name of the will of the people, the authorities have prioritized political gains over the protection of human rights. The case of Matsumoto Kenji, who has been on death row in Japan for more than 30 years, shows this clearly. He has severe intellectual and mental disabilities that have impacted his ability to defend himself and, at present, does not have a rational understanding of his punishment, yet he remains at risk of execution. His lawyer said that the “confession” used to convict him was coerced through pressure during police interrogation. The imposition of the death penalty on those with mental and intellectual disabilities who cannot defend

²⁸ Amnesty International USA, “Amnesty International USA Reaction to White House Executive Memo to Silence Dissent”, 26 September 2025, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/amnesty-international-usa-reaction-to-white-house-executive-memo-to-silence-dissent/>; “The Trump Administration’s Call to ‘Reframe’ the Global Asylum System Would Harm People Seeking Safety”, 26 September 2025, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/the-trump-administrations-call-to-reframe-the-global-asylum-system-would-harm-people-seeking-safety/>

²⁹ Reuters, “Trump says he’ll seek the death penalty for ‘rapists, murderers, and monsters’”, 24 December 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-he-will-look-death-penalty-rapists-murderers-monsters-2024-12-24/>

³⁰ The White House, “Restoring the death penalty and protecting public safety”, 20 January 2025; The White House, “Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Directs the Enforcement of Death Penalty Laws in the District of Columbia”, 25 September 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/09/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-directs-the-enforcement-of-death-penalty-laws-in-the-district-of-columbia/>

³¹ Metropolitan Police-Washington D.C., “2025 Year-to-Date Crime Comparison”, 7 October 2025, <https://mpdc.dc.gov/dailycrime>

³² Roger Hood, “The question of the death penalty and the new contributions of the criminal sciences to the matter: a report to the United Nations Committee on Crime Prevention and Control”, UN Doc.E/AC.57/1988/CRP.7, 1988. The survey was last reviewed and published commercially as Hood and Hoyle, “The Death Penalty- A worldwide perspective”, Fifth edition, Oxford University Press, 2016.

³³ The Death Penalty Project, “Public opinion and the death penalty”, 1 November 2022, <https://deathpenaltyproject.org/knowledge/public-opinion-policy-position-paper/>

³⁴ Japan Times, “Japan executes ‘Twitter killer’ in first hanging since 2022”, 27 June 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/06/27/japan/crime-legal/prisoner-on-death-row-executed/>

themselves on an equal basis with others is prohibited under international human rights law and standards.³⁵ Even though the Minister of Justice can initiate under Article 479 of Japan's Code of Criminal Procedure a review of cases where there is credible evidence that people sentenced to death have a severe mental disability and stay the execution, the authorities have continued to pursue the death penalty in his case.

3.3 Death penalty as a tool in the “war on drugs”

International safeguards and restrictions to the use of the death penalty have also been frequently flaunted in the name of the so-called “war on drugs”, amidst alarming increases of drug-related executions in recent years. In 2024, Amnesty International recorded more than 630 drug-related executions, which constituted 42% 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 2015.³⁶

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 in Iran carried out approximately 500 executions for drug-related offences in 2024.³⁷ In Saudi Arabia, drug-related executions (122) constituted 35% of the national total in 2024 and an alarming rise from the only two recorded in 2023.³⁸ In Singapore, eight out of 9 executions carried over 2024 were drug-related.³⁹ Monitoring also suggests that drug-related executions were carried out in Viet Nam, but could not be confirmed due to restrictive state practices.

There is also no proof that the death penalty has a unique deterrent effect on drug use or trafficking. After decades of sustained use of the death penalty and other punitive responses to drug-related crime, the global drug market is growing steadily and shifting rapidly, as noted by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.⁴⁰ In fact, the UN has long highlighted that the death penalty has the potential to become an obstacle to effective cross-border and international cooperation against drug trafficking.⁴¹

The flawed security narratives related to the drug trade also appear to be behind initiatives to unlawfully expand the scope of this cruel punishment. Most recently, the President of the Republic of the **Maldives**, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, was reported on 30 July 2025 as indicating that he had instructed legislative amendments to introduce the death penalty for drug trafficking.⁴² President Muizzu portrayed the death penalty as a tool “to save the society from the scourge of drugs and to build a generation free from drugs”.

The promotion of highly punitive “zero tolerance” and “iron-fist” on crime approaches that are not rooted in evidence supports a culture of misinformation and human rights violations. Effective drug control policies must be centred around public health and human rights, addressing the root causes that lead people to engage in the drug market, including poverty, unemployment and marginalization.

4. DESPITE SETBACKS, HOPES FOR A DEATH PENALTY FREE WORLD UNSHAKABLE

The first nine months of 2025 have highlighted the need to strengthen the resistance against the judicial machinery of death. The harrowing choice of a handful of governments that continue to pursue this cruel punishment as a tool for repression and control, in violation of international standards, not only risks reverting the progress that the abolitionist movement has fought so hard for, but also opening the doors to a starker expansion of authoritarian practices. This must not remain unchallenged.

³⁵ UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 – Article 6: right to life, UN Doc.CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019, para.49.

³⁶ Amnesty International, “Death sentences and executions in 2024” (ACT 50/8976/2025), April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>

³⁷ Amnesty International, “Death sentences and executions in 2024” (ACT 50/8976/2025), April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>

³⁸ 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

³⁹ 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/>

⁴⁰ UN Office on Drugs and Crime, World Drug Report 2025 - Key findings, June 2025, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_B1_Key_findings.pdf

⁴¹ UN system coordination Task Team on the Implementation of the UN System Common Position on drug-related matters, “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.

⁴² Amnesty International, The Maldives: Reject introduction of death penalty for drug trafficking and abolish this punishment once and for all (joint statement, ACT 50/0197/2025), 13 August 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/0197/2025/en/>

Recent developments also suggest that a positive human rights impact is possible when there is sufficient political will to abolish the death penalty. Among other examples, on 25 June 2025, the Parliament of Viet Nam voted to repeal the death penalty in the Penal Code for eight crimes, including for transporting drugs, a change that is likely to result in a significant decrease in the resort to the death penalty.⁴³ In Malaysia, where the 2023 repeal of the mandatory death penalty resulted in the commutation of more than 1,000 death sentences, the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Law and Institutional Reform), Datuk Seri Azalina Othman Said, announced in Parliament on 21 July 2025 that the moratorium on executions established in 2018 remained in place and that the government was tasking a committee with a comprehensive review of the direction on the death penalty in Malaysia, "including implementation and legal and human rights aspects of the complete abolition of the death penalty".⁴⁴

As of today, 113 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes and close to three quarters of all countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. In marking the 23rd World Day Against the Death Penalty, there is no doubt that the use of the death penalty must be denounced, opposed and resisted.

In view of the clear goal of the abolition of the death penalty set out under international law and standards, and the violations of human rights inherently associated with the use of the death penalty and the arbitrariness and politicization of its use, Amnesty International urges governments in all countries that still retain this cruel punishment to immediately establish a moratorium on all executions with a view to its full abolition and commutation of all death sentences as a matter of urgency.

⁴³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Viet Nam: Parliament votes to abolish death penalty for some offences", 27 June 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/viet-nam-parliament-votes-abolish-death-penalty-some-offences>

⁴⁴ Bernama, Govt to form task force to review death penalty policy, direction - Azalina, 22 July 2025, <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2448106>