

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

The ultimate punishment: A beginner's guide to the death penalty

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2015/04/The-ultimate-punishment-a-beginner-s-guide-to-the-death-penalty/>

How widespread is the use of the death penalty?

Fifty-five countries are known to have sentenced at least 2,466 people to death in 2014 – a 28% increase from 2013. This is mainly due to a spike in death sentences in Egypt and Nigeria.

Amnesty International also recorded 607 executions in 22 countries in 2014.

But the real number of people executed is much higher. There are no figures for China, for example, which is believed to execute more people than the rest of the world put together.

Likewise, many countries, including Belarus, carry out executions in secret, often without informing the detainees' relatives or lawyers.

In other countries such as Eritrea, Malaysia, North Korea and Syria, little or no information about the use of the death penalty is available due to restrictive state practice and/or political instability.

And how many people are still on death row?

We know that at the end of 2014 there were around 20,000 people on death row across the world.

So the picture is actually pretty bleak ...

Yes, but we have also seen some progress. The world is slowly turning away from using the death penalty.

The number of countries imposing death sentences has gone down from 57 in 2013 to 55 in 2014.

Europe and the Americas are near execution-free-zones, with the exception of Belarus and the USA. And in the USA we have seen a decrease in both the number of sentences imposed and executions carried out, with the state of Washington establishing a moratorium on executions in 2014.

Only three countries are known to have carried out executions in sub-Saharan Africa; and in the Asia-Pacific region debates on abolition began in Fiji, South Korea and Thailand.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the number of executions recorded by Amnesty International has decreased by approximately 23% compared to 2013.

And in December, the National Assembly of Madagascar adopted a bill to abolish the death penalty.

Why are countries still resorting to the death penalty?

In 2014, we have found that many of the countries that still carry out executions justify their actions as a response to threats – real or perceived – to state security and public safety posed by terrorism, crime or internal instability.

In December 2014, in the wake of the Peshawar school terrorist attack that killed 149 people, mainly children, Pakistan lifted a moratorium on executions first imposed in September 2008. Dozens of people have been executed since then.

Executions for terrorism-related offences also continued to be recorded in China, Iran and Iraq.

Jordan started using the death penalty again and Indonesia moved close to carrying out executions, both justifying their actions as responses to crime.

Many other countries – including Iran, North Korea, the State of Palestine and Saudi Arabia – continued to use the death penalty as a tool to suppress political dissent.

Aren't executions carried out in a more humane way nowadays?

There's no "humane" way to execute someone.

Many countries still hang, behead or shoot people. In the USA, the use of lethal injection resulted in three "botched executions" in 2014 alone.

Isn't keeping people in prison for life simply too expensive?

This is not true. And even if it was, it would not be a justification for killing people. In the USA, the rigorous trial procedures and lengthy appeals process in capital cases mean that the death penalty costs more than imprisoning someone for life. Different US studies have found that capital punishment is between one point five and three times as expensive as life imprisonment.

But to justify judicial killing based on the notion that it will save money is not only morally objectionable – cut-price human rights violations are still human rights violations – it ignores the fact that it has other costs. For example, it risks brutalizing those involved in its application and it deprives the family members of the condemned prisoner of a loved one.

The death penalty also diverts energy and resources that could be used for more constructive solutions to crime, such as improving police investigations or care for crime victims' families.

But surely the death penalty is a fair punishment for serious crimes such as murder or rape?

The right to life is a human right inherent to all human beings. Crime must be prevented and punished, but in full respect of human rights and dignity. Execution is an irreversible punishment. Last year, 112 people were exonerated in nine countries after the death penalty had been imposed: innocent people who would have been put to death.

In the majority of countries where people were sentenced to death or executed, the death penalty was imposed after proceedings that did not meet international fair trial standards.

In several countries – including Afghanistan, Bahrain, China, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Saudi Arabia – death sentences were based on “confessions” that were extracted through torture or other ill-treatment.

In addition, people around the world continue to be sentenced to death and executed for non-lethal crimes, including drug related offences, corruption, committing “adultery” while married, “insulting the prophet of Islam”, “witchcraft” and “sorcery”.

For more information, see:

“Death Penalty Myths debunked”

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2014/03/five-death-penalty-myths-debunked/>