

International Actions with the view to abolishing the death penalty

Side event : Geneva March 3 2014

I would like to thank the Permanent Missions of the states represented here today for organizing this important event, and for giving Penal Reform International the opportunity to join in this discussion. Abolition of the death penalty is one of the founding aims of our organization and one that we have sought to achieve since we were established some 25 years ago.

Introduction to PRI

For those who are not familiar with our work, PRI is an independent non-governmental organization that develops and promotes fair, effective and proportionate responses to criminal justice problems worldwide.

We base our work on international human rights standards and promote reform through advocacy at international, regional and national levels, through production and dissemination of information and resource materials; and through technical assistance and practical programmes of reform at a national level, delivered through our regional offices and local partner organisations.

PRI's work on the death penalty

Our current work focuses on supporting governments, Parliamentarians, civil society and others to make progress towards abolition of the death penalty in 10 countries. It aims to reduce the application of the death penalty, to implement sentences that are fair, proportionate and respect international human rights and to raise awareness of and support for these issues.

The activities we are implementing to achieve these aims include:

- **Providing technical support to Parliamentarians** to make legal and policy reforms towards abolition of the DP and humane alternatives. For example, we organized a visit for progressive MPs from 9 countries (*Belarus, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia*) to London and Brussels. They met with abolitionist MPs and government officials, visited prisons to see how alternatives to the DP operate, and forged links between each other.
- The outcomes of this visit were very positive: the MPs returned to their countries with great commitment and enhanced skills to campaign for abolition through their own country channels.
- **Training prison officials** on international minimum standards to ensure prisoners' treatment complies with international standards.
- **Building the capacity of civil society organisations** to develop their advocacy, knowledge and awareness-raising skills to campaign effectively.

- **Publishing research** papers to provide an evidence base for abolition – for example on the death penalty for terrorism-related offences in Central Asia. We are currently supporting research on the relationship of sharia law to the application of the death penalty.
- We have a **small grants programme** that funds activities such as organizing public opinion surveys or producing films on the death penalty.
- **Supporting , training and providing information to journalists** –we are holding an international competition for journalists later this year.

We are also on the steering committee of the **World Coalition against the Death Penalty** and promote human rights and DP abolition through its network of 152 organisations worldwide.

Looking ahead

As we know only too well, progress on abolition is slow and uncertain, depending as it does on political will and circumstances, that may change at a moment's notice.

Currently, the death penalty is often in the news in relation to terrorist and drugs offences and these are two areas where sharing information between States would be very helpful.

Drugs: Iran executes around 600 people for drug offences – each year. It is a staggeringly high number and goes against the global trend towards reducing the use of the death penalty for drug offences. There is increasing concern that the 'war on drugs' is ineffective and expensive and this is an area where States could jointly develop a more proportionate sentencing approach.

Terrorism: There is a risk that without a universal definition, the word 'terrorism' is used to include a wide range of offences including non-violent political protests that should not properly be described as terrorism. Trials for terrorist offences are often conducted in secrecy, with procedural restrictions that can prevent or obstruct a fair trial and increase the risk of miscarriages of justice. Minimum safeguards may not be upheld and where criminal justice systems are open to error and discrimination, the death penalty will inevitably be inflicted on the innocent.

In conclusion: Looking back, much progress has been made towards abolition. But looking forward, we can see that there are still many challenges ahead – and today's discussions will help us all to identify how best to meet them.

Alison Hannah