



UN Human Rights Council - high-level side event The Death Penalty: Why and how to abolish 25 February 2013

On the 25th of February the International Commission against Death Penalty (ICDP) held a high-level panel meeting at Palais the Nations, to coincide with the 22th session of the UN Human Rights Council. The event focussed on why and how to abolish death penalty. There were interventions from ICDP's President Mr Federico Mayor and ICDP Commissioner Mr Mohammed Bedjaoui; Ms Gry Larsen, Norway's Secretary of State from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Mr Jesús Gracia, Spain's Secretary of State for International Cooperation and Iberoamerica; Ms Kyung-wha Kang, the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and Mr Stavros Lambrinidis, the European Union Special Representative on Human Rights. Ms Ruth Dreifuss, ICDP Commissioner and former President of the Swiss Confederation, chaired the meeting.

The meeting opened with a message from the UN Secretary-General Mr Ban Ki-moon in which he recalled the UN's engagement in advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. In concluding he said, "Capital punishment is inconsistent with the mission of the United Nations to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights and the dignity and worth of the human person".

In her statement Ms Gry Larsen outlined the reasons for abolition and noted the trend towards abolition "It is no longer a question of if we will reach full abolition, but of when", she said. Mr Mohammed Bedjaoui referred to the benefits of suspending executions but stressed that a moratorium is not a substitute for abolition of the death penalty in law. The UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights outlined reasons to abolish the death penalty and reiterated that capital punishment does not deter criminality more than any other forms of punishment and that what effectively deters criminals is more the certainty of punishment, rather than its severity. Mr Federico Mayor urged governments and political leaders to take the lead and repeal capital punishment even if there was apparent support for it among some sectors of society. Mr Stavros Lambrinidis recalled EU actions against death penalty, such as the EU guidelines on the death penalty and that abolition of the death penalty was a requirement for EU membership. Mr Jesús Gracia stressed Spain's engagement for the cause of abolition. He highlighted that his country is hosting the 5th World Congress against Death Penalty in Madrid (12-15 June 2013) which will bring together NGOs, governments, representatives of intergovernmental organizations, jurists and scholars in constructive dialogues on the death penalty and strategies to achieve abolition.

Panellists also stressed the need to advocate against death penalty at the national, regional and international levels. Abolitionist states were requested to join the 75 countries that have already ratified the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming at the abolition of death penalty. De facto abolitionist states were urged to repeal laws on capital punishment and, pending abolition, establish an official moratorium on executions. Retentionist states were asked to initiate a dialogue on abolition and to start by making information and statistics on the death penalty available to the public.

The event concluded with a series of interventions from the participants in the room. The the importance of the UN's Universal Periodic Review process and the role of the Special Rapporteurs was stressed. Two initiatives in the UN Human Rights Council were announced. The first, would which would establish a high-level panel discussion on the 'question of death penalty' at the 25th session. The second, would convene a panel discussion to focus on the impact on children whose parents had been sentenced to death. Finally, one participant drew attention to the high-level of executions in Iran, many in clear violation of international human rights law.