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against the Death Penalty**

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**International Commission against the Death Penalty
Opinion piece**

Published by the New York Times / International Herald Tribune (online) 20 February 2013 and International Herald Tribune (print edition) 21 February 2013

By MOHAMMED BEDJAOUÏ, RUTH DREIFUSS and FEDERICO MAYOR

It is ironic that, just weeks after a historic United Nations vote calling for a worldwide halt to executions, capital punishment is never far from the international headlines.

In mid-December, the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly for a global moratorium on the death penalty. This fourth such vote in five years was supported by a record 111 nations.

Yet in the first month of 2013, Saudi Arabia beheaded nine people. In recent weeks, Yemen has sentenced a juvenile offender to death, fuelling hunger strikes by scores of imprisoned children. Iran has reportedly begun imposing death sentences for petty criminals accused of robbery.

Elsewhere, a court in Indonesia, where there have been no state executions since 2008, has sentenced a British grandmother to death for drug trafficking – reportedly to audible gasps of disbelief in the courtroom. Zimbabwe has hired a hangman after seven years of searching, while Sri Lanka – which has not carried out an execution since 1976 – has reportedly recruited two executioners who are undergoing special training.

In the USA, the trend is towards fewer executions and death sentences, with more US states repealing death penalty laws. Nevertheless, in 2012 there were 43 executions and 77 death sentences.

Such emerging developments make for grim reading. However, we at the International Commission against the Death Penalty, an independent body opposed to capital punishment in all cases and led by a group of high-profile commissioners from around the world, remain hopeful. It is clear that the world is becoming an increasingly lonely place for executing states.

The UN call for a death penalty moratorium is underpinned by a global trend towards abolition that has gathered dramatic pace in recent years. 105 countries have repealed capital punishment in their laws and others no longer carry out executions. According to the UN, over 150 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

Right across humanity's diverse and sprawling community – encompassing all major cultures, religions and regions – there is growing understanding that this abhorrent practice has no place in modern justice systems.

Quite simply, the death penalty does much harm and no good. It is inherently cruel, risks execution of the innocent, and is ineffective at deterring violent crime. States that have abolished capital punishment often have lower murder rates than those that have yet to do so.

Much remains to be done of course. Not least because a handful of executing states remain willing to risk international outrage, controversy and isolation by persisting with this cruel, inhuman and degrading practice. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen – all in the global spotlight in recent weeks – are accompanied by China, Iraq, North Korea, and the USA as the world's most prolific executioners year on year.

As the UN's Human Rights Council meets in Geneva this week, we are bringing together high-level government representatives to assess why and how the death penalty should be abolished.

Our guests at this high-level event will include Foreign Ministers and senior officials from forward-looking nations including Argentina, Norway, Spain and Switzerland. We will also hear from Kyung-wha Kang, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights and receive a message from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon.

Ultimately, experience from all over the world demonstrates that the death penalty is not just cruel, irrevocable and a violation of the right to life. It is a toxic and destructive punishment that damages society by endorsing violence and by causing injustice and suffering.

As more countries conclude that the only place for capital punishment is in the history books, the shrinking group of executing states looks set to become ever more isolated. The challenge for their leaders is to show political courage and foresight, and to bring their laws into the modern age by immediately suspending use of the death penalty, as a first step towards full abolition.

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*The writers are members of the International Commission against the Death Penalty (www.icomdp.org), an independent body of politically influential people supported by a diverse group of 16 governments. **Mohammed Bedjaoui** is former Foreign Minister of Algeria, and former Judge at the International Court of Justice. **Ruth Dreifuss** is former President of the Swiss Confederation. **Federico Mayor** is President of ICDP and former Director General, UNESCO and former Minister of Education and Science of Spain.*