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International Commission
against the Death Penalty

ICDP 03/2021

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Statement by the International Commission against the Death Penalty: Governor Northam signs into law the bill abolishing the death penalty making Virginia the 23rd USA state free of capital punishment

The International Commission against the Death Penalty (ICDP or Commission) warmly welcomes the signature by Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, on 24 March 2021, of legislation abolishing the death penalty in his state. By doing so, Virginia has become the 23rd state in the USA to end capital punishment. The legislation he signed, comprised of Senate Bill 1165, sponsored by Senator Scott Surovell, and House Bill 2263, sponsored by Delegate Mike Mullin, which prohibit the use of capital punishment for any violation of Virginia law.

The Commission notes the historic nature of the abolition in Virginia as the state had, over its 400-year history, carried out the executions over 1,300 people, more than any other USA state.

ICDP President Judge Navi Pillay agree with Governor Northam when he highlighted during his speech after his signature that, “The death penalty system is fundamentally flawed—it is inequitable, ineffective, and it has no place in this Commonwealth (of Virginia) or this country (USA). Virginia has come within days of executing innocent people, and Black defendants have been disproportionately sentenced to death. Abolishing this inhumane practice is the moral thing to do.”

It is important to put in perspective the flawed, disproportionate, arbitrary situation of the death penalty in Virginia when reports suggest that in the 20th century, 296 of the 377 executions that authorities in the state carried out were Black; 52 of the 113 persons whose executions were carried out in Virginia, since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, were Black.

According to ICDP President Pillay, “strong political leadership is key in shaping public discourse and enabling legislative bodies to take action towards abolition of capital punishment and so, I join my fellow Commissioners, including Honorary Commissioner Bill Richardson, who led the abolition of the death penalty when he was Governor of New Mexico, in warmly commending the leadership shown by Virginia’s House of Delegates, the Senate and Governor Ralph Northam in making their state free of the death penalty. The death penalty has no place in the 21st century.”

ICDP calls on all governments and legislative bodies in the USA and beyond to follow the lead of the state of Virginia in abolishing capital punishment. By doing so, leaders can ensure the respect and protection of the fundamental right to life.

Virginia carried out its last execution for capital murder by lethal injection on 6 July 2017. Following the abolition of capital punishment, the sentences of two individuals, who were facing death penalty, will be commuted to life in prison without parole.

The repeal in Virginia continues the national erosion of capital punishment as it becomes the 11th state in the last 16 years in the USA to abolish the death penalty.



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Background

Composed of 23 Commissioners, who are persons of high international standing and who represent all regions of the world, ICDP acts with total independence and neutrality and works under its President Judge Navi Pillay.

The Commission promotes the abolition of capital punishment in law in those States that observe a *de facto* moratorium on the use of the death penalty and promotes moratoriums on executions in States that rarely use the death penalty. ICDP works with the United Nations and other international and regional organizations, governments and nongovernmental organizations to further the abolition of capital punishments worldwide. The work of ICDP is supported by a diverse group of 23 Member-States from all parts of the world that are committed to the abolition of the death penalty. Its Secretariat is based in Madrid.