

# **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Death penalty 2018: Dramatic fall in global executions**

- **Global executions fell by 31%, reaching lowest figure in at least a decade**
- **But several countries saw a rise in executions, including Belarus, Japan, Singapore, South Sudan and USA**
- **In the Middle East and North Africa executions fell by 41% compared to 2017 - reaching the lowest level since 2010**
- **China remained world's top executioner, followed by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Viet Nam and Iraq**

Global executions fell by almost one-third last year to the lowest figure in at least a decade, Amnesty International said in its 2018 global review of the death penalty published today. The statistics assess known executions worldwide except in China, where figures thought to be in their thousands remain classified as a state secret.

Following a change to its anti-narcotics laws, executions in Iran – a country where the use of the death penalty is rife – fell by a staggering 50%. Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia also showed a significant reduction in the number they carried out. As a result, execution figures fell globally from at least 993 in 2017, to at least 690 in 2018.

“The dramatic global fall in executions proves that even the most unlikely countries are starting to change their ways and realize the death penalty is not the answer,” said Kumi Naidoo, Amnesty International’s Secretary General.

“Despite regressive steps from some, the number of executions carried out by several of the worst perpetrators has fallen significantly. This is a hopeful indication that it’s only a matter of time before this cruel punishment is consigned to history, where it belongs.”

#### **Middle East and North Africa**

The total number of executions recorded by Amnesty International in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) dropped from 847 in 2017 to 501 in 2018 – the lowest number of executions recorded in the region since 2010.

The reduction was driven in particular by large drops in the number of executions in Iran and Iraq. In Iran, executions halved from 507 in 2017 to 253 in 2018 following changes in the country’s anti-narcotics law to increase the threshold for quantity of drugs involved in an offence to impose a mandatory death sentence and a temporary halt in executions for drug-related offences. In Iraq there was a 58% drop in executions, with at least 52 recorded in 2018 compared to at least 125 in 2017.

The number of countries in MENA that are known to have carried out executions also dropped by half from 10 countries in 2017 to just five in 2018. Iran topped the list with 253 executions, Saudi Arabia carried out 149, Iraq 52, Egypt 43 and Yemen at least four.

Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq remained among the world's top executioners after China carrying out 454 executions between them – 91% of those in the region.

Despite a significant decrease in the number of executions it carried out, Iran still accounted for more than one third of executions recorded globally.

One of the most shocking execution cases in Iran was that of Zeinab Sekaanvand, who was arrested at the age of 17 and convicted after an unfair trial over the murder of her husband whom she said had subjected her to domestic and sexual violence. She had reported being tortured while in custody in order to “confess” to the crime.

Despite the drop in executions overall in MENA, there was a sharp spike in the number of death sentences that were imposed in the region over the course of the year – which shot up by 89% to 1,170 compared to just 619 recorded in 2017. Across the region death sentences were often imposed after unfair trials – including based on confessions extracted through torture.

In Iraq, the number of death sentences quadrupled from at least 65 in 2017, to at least 271 in 2018. In Egypt, the number of death sentences handed down rose by more than 75%, from at least 402 in 2017, to at least 717 in 2018 - the highest ever recorded by Amnesty International in the country. This rise can be attributed to the Egyptian authorities' appalling track record of handing out mass death sentences after grossly unfair trials – including military trials - often based on “confessions” obtained under torture and flawed police investigations. Amnesty International's research also indicates that in some cases – particularly crimes such as terrorism and incitement of violence - those convicted could not have committed the offence as they were in police custody when the crimes were perpetrated.

In Saudi Arabia the death penalty has been regularly used by the authorities as a tool to crush dissent. The public prosecution have called for the execution of several Shi'a activists and religious clerics on charges relating to the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression association and assembly. Among them is the prominent religious cleric Salman al-Awda. Four Shi'a activists are also facing the death penalty for charges related to their participation in protests calling for reforms in the Shi'a-majority Eastern Province.

The Saudi Arabian authorities also issued a Law on Juveniles which stipulated that children under the age of 18 could no longer be sentenced to death at the judge's discretion. The law excluded however crimes punishable by death under Shari'a (Islamic law), leaving juveniles still at risk of the death penalty.

In a moving case from Sudan, Noura Hussein was sentenced to death in May 2018 for killing the man she was forced to marry as he tried to rape her. After global outrage,

including major campaigning efforts from Amnesty International, her death sentence was over-turned, and she was instead given a five-year prison sentence.

Noura told Amnesty International:

“I was in absolute shock when the judge told me I had been sentenced to death. I hadn't done anything to deserve to die. I couldn't believe the level of injustice – especially on women. I'd never imagined being executed before that moment. The first thing that came to my mind was, 'How do people feel when they are executed? What do they do?'. My case was especially hard as at the time of sentencing, my family had disowned me. I was alone dealing with the shock.”

### **Reinstating the death penalty**

Amnesty International found increases in executions in Belarus, Japan, Singapore, South Sudan and the USA. Thailand carried out its first execution since 2009, while Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena declared he would resume executions after more than 40 years, posting an advert seeking executioners in February 2019.

“Japan, Singapore and South Sudan reported their highest levels of executions in years, and Thailand resumed executions after almost a decade; but these countries now form a dwindling minority. To all the countries that still resort to the death penalty, I challenge you to act boldly and put a stop to this abhorrent punishment now,” said Kumi Naidoo.

### **The world's top executioners**

China remained the world's top executioner – but the true extent of the use of the death penalty in China is unknown as this data is classified as a state secret. Amnesty International believes [thousands of people are sentenced to death and executed](#) each year.

In an unprecedented move, death penalty figures were made publicly available by authorities in Viet Nam, who reported that at least 85 executions took place in 2018. This tally confirms its place within the world's top five executing countries: China (1000s), Iran (at least 253), Saudi Arabia (149), Viet Nam (at least 85) and Iraq (at least 52).

Hồ Duy Hải, convicted of theft and murder after he says he was tortured into signing a “confession”, was sentenced to death in 2008. He remains at risk of execution on death row in Viet Nam. The stress of a pending death sentence has had a hugely detrimental impact on his family.

His mother, Nguyễn Thị Loan, told Amnesty International:

“It has been 11 years since he was arrested and our family was torn apart. I can no longer bear this pain. Just thinking about my son suffering behind bars hurts me so much. I would like the international community to help reunite my family. You are my only hope.”

### **Global trend towards abolition**

Overall, 2018’s figures show that the death penalty is firmly in decline, and that effective steps are being taken across the world to end the use of this cruel and inhuman punishment.

For example, [Burkina Faso](#) adopted a new penal code that effectively abolished the death penalty in June. In February and July respectively, [Gambia](#) and [Malaysia](#) both declared an official moratorium on executions. In the US, the death penalty statute in the state of [Washington](#) was declared unconstitutional in October.

During the United Nations General Assembly in December, 121 countries – an unprecedented number - voted to support a global moratorium on the death penalty. Only 35 states voted against it.

“Slowly but steadily, global consensus is building towards ending the use of the death penalty. Amnesty has been campaigning to stop executions around the world for more than 40 years – but with more than 19,000 people still languishing on death row worldwide, the struggle is far from over,” said Kumi Naidoo.

“From Burkina Faso to the US, concrete steps are being taken to abolish the death penalty. Now it’s up to other countries to follow suit. We all want to live in a safe society, but executions are never the solution. With the continued support of people worldwide, we can – and we will – put an end to the death penalty once and for all.”

At the end of 2018, **106** countries had abolished the death penalty in law for all crimes and **142** countries had abolished the death penalty in law or practice.

### **ENDS**

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**The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. Amnesty opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception - regardless of who is accused, the nature or circumstances of the crime, guilt or innocence or method of execution.**