

# 21<sup>st</sup> World Day Against the Death Penalty

## TESTIMONIES

### *Torture and the Death Penalty*



**This document has been compiled by the Secretariat of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty with substantial aid from member organizations, including Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, Amnesty International, Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide, Free Mumia ! French Support Group (Collectif français "Libérons Mumia !"), German Coalition Against the Death Penalty, Justice Project Pakistan, Parliamentarians for Global Action, Reprieve, Sant'Egidio, Taiwan Alliance Against the Death Penalty and Witness to Innocence.**

**Every effort has been made to preserve the testimonies in the original form in which they were received, with edits being made either for clarity, security or for length. If a testimony has been edited, it will be stated.**

***We thank all those who agreed to share their testimonies and their stories.***

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# Indonesia

**Merri Utami**

“Twenty years ago (this October), I was sentenced to death for a drug offense. I have spent 20 years in prison for an act I did not understand at the time. During this long imprisonment, I have suffered a lot. I still remember how the media covered my case when I was arrested and dubbed me the ‘Queen of Heroin.’ I had no chance to tell the truth. I still remember that during the police investigation stage, I said repeatedly that the drugs were not mine, but no one was there to help me, and no one believed me. They tortured me, but even then, I would not confess.”

*Testimony collected by the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide.*

# Iran

**Bahram Ahmadi**



During his detention period, Mr. Ahmadi was frequently tortured. He told his cellmates that his interrogators used electric shocks, lashing, food deprivation, and threats against his family in order to get him to confess to having links to extremist groups whose goal was to overthrow the regime. Interrogators also insulted and demeaned Mr. Ahmadi as a Sunni and attacked his religious beliefs.

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*  
<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7321/bahram-ahmadi>

**Hashem Sha'baninejad**



“After spending five months in the Ministry of Information’s secret solitary confinement, I succumbed to their wishes and did everything they asked me to, uttering the words that were dictated to me. Two months after the false confession, I was transferred to Karun Prison...At the first trial, which was conducted on May 21, 2012, I told the truth to the judge...I emphasized to the judge that I had implicated others at the behest of the security forces and that I had been coerced to do so under mental and psychological duress and under [physical] torture.”

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*

<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/71725/hashem-shabaninejad-amuri>

### Navid Afkari



“They would pull a plastic bag over my head and drive me to the brink of asphyxiation and death. They would severely beat me on my arms, legs and stomach with clubs and other hard objects and would repeatedly insult me using the vilest language. They would tie me up and pour alcohol down my nose.”

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center in 2021:*

<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-8506/navid-farshid-afkari-sangari>

### Behnud Shojaei

*An alleged juvenile offender, he was informed of his own imminent execution five times before being put to death in 2009. On three of these occasions, he went to the gallows, where he witnessed 14 hangings.*



“I have spent four and a half years of my life in jail among a bunch of criminals since I was 17. I swear to God, the punishment I have suffered is enough to last a lifetime. I pray to God that even [my] worst enemy doesn’t end up in a place like this.”

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*

<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7591/behnud-shojai>

### Behruz Alkhani’s Brother



“He had been tortured during detention. They had drilled a hole into his ankle and broken his fingers. They gave my brother electric shocks and beat him up with a cable on numerous occasions.”

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*

<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-8093/behruz-alkhani>

## Kamal Molaii

"They tortured me and said, 'We're going to kill you, we're going to persecute your family; you must accept everything we tell you and say it in front of the camera, say that you did it; you must sign every letter we bring you.' Fearing for my family and to stop them from increasing the torture, I agreed."



Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7624/kamal-molaii>

## Reyhaneh Jabbari Malayeri



"The chubby man [in interrogations] pulled my head back, and the beardless man slapped my ears a few times: left, right, left, right. I experienced the first real thrashing of my life...I felt something in my back. I felt the swelling of my skin, and then...rip....my skin ruptured. I had a vision of my little sisters being made helpless like me...They bound your hands and feet. Then they hung you from a rod, like a piece of clothing, and kicked you in your stomach with their knees ...."

Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7338/reyhaneh-jabbari-malayeri>

## Anonymous – Wife

*Her husband was put to death on drug charges in May 2016*

"My daughter's behavior changed when my husband died. She became abrasive and angry. If I raise my voice a little, she immediately raises hers and says, "I wish my father was here with me". A few nights ago, she was in her room studying and didn't answer, no matter how many times I called her. I went to her room and saw that she was hugging her father's picture and lying down under her blanket.

Sometimes she says she misses her father: "Why did Baba leave? Why are you and I alone?" And sometimes she asks: "Do you love me, Mommy?" and I say that I do, and she says: "Don't love me, and I won't love you because God quickly takes those that you love away. I won't have anybody if God takes you from me. My Baba is gone; who do I stay with if you leave me too?" Other times she asks: "Mommy, am I a good girl? Are you happy with me?" to which I say yes, and

**My daughter's behavior changed when my husband died. She became abrasive and angry. If I raise my voice a little, she immediately raises hers.**

then she says: "So I will go be with Baba. Isn't that what you say, that God takes good people away? Well, I want to go be with Baba as soon as possible."

Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3264>

**Serveh Mahmudzadeh**

*She is the wife of Habib Afshari, an ethnic Kurd executed on security-related charges in 2015.*

"I didn't know how to break it to her [that her father had been executed]. I thought it best to hold off until she was older, thinking that she might realize it herself when she noticed that her father was not calling and we weren't going for visitations anymore...But one of her classmates at school, whose mother knew me and used to come to the hair salon where I worked, had told the other children...and that was how she learned she no longer had a father.

**She would get on the kitchen counter and say, "I'm going to jump off of here and kill myself. Why didn't you tell me they killed my father?"**

She was depressed for about three months. I would tell her to study and do her homework when she came home, and she would cry; I would tell her to get her book out of her bag, and she would cry. In short, she would cry for any reason and for no reason at all. She would get on the kitchen counter and say, "I'm going to jump off of here and kill myself. Why didn't you tell me they killed my father? Why did you lie to me when you

told me they had transferred him to another prison and the guards don't let him make phone calls? Why did you lie to me when you said Papa was alive? The kids at school told me I didn't have a father and that he had been hanged." I took her to the doctor numerous times, and the doctor would say she didn't have any issues. But she would vomit everything she ate or drank, even water."

Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3444>

**Anonymous – Sister**

*Her brother was put to death on drug charges in January 2015*

"After my brother's execution, we all [felt guilty]; we were asking ourselves why we didn't do more, thinking maybe there was something that could have been done, but we just weren't able to do it. My husband, who loves his own brother to death, sits down crying and says: "I wish my brother had died instead of Hossein. Hossein meant something else to me. I have lost all hope ever since he's been gone."

I became seriously ill after my brother's execution. I was hospitalized three times in a single week. Right now, I cannot sleep or speak if I don't take pills. I'm undergoing psychological treatment. I was the one who suffered the most; no one endured the psychological torture that I did; I [couldn't] even talk to my own kid anymore, and I hit her. I feel like I was at fault because I was the one who told my brother to come to our house that night.

**Hossein meant something else to me. I have lost all hope ever since he's been gone.**



I go over these things a hundred times a day. I keep dreaming that they took my brother from our house, and when I open my eyes, I am reminded of him walking that hallway all alone to reach the gallows. I begged anyone you can imagine, begging them to take me instead of my brother, saying that I had lived my life already, begging them to let my brother live. I said I would be their slave, I would be their maid, I would be their dog, I used all of these words, and I fell at their feet. But now, in my heart, I miss my brother's scent."

Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3204>

### Homa Shahsavaripour

*Her father, Gholamreza Shahsavaripour, was executed on trumped-up drug charges in 1990.*

"The psychiatrist's very first diagnosis was that all these symptoms that I have displayed all these years – that I'm nervous, occasionally depressed, etc. – were not symptoms of severe depression. "Your problem is trauma," he said, "because after 30 years, when you see the image of a gallows on TV, you're subconsciously reminded of your father, and generally, anything that has to do with execution reminds you of your father. So the harm you have suffered is trauma, and you need to be treated for trauma."

**This is not severe depression, but trauma, and it requires special treatment. It needs to be addressed. Otherwise, it will just be transferred down the line to the next generations.**

At that point, what occurred to me, which was actually shocking even to myself, was that I had always thought that I was the healthiest among my brothers and other friends who had lost their fathers, and that I had been the least affected and the least harmed by the events... This tragedy is still new to them, still fresh, just as it is to us. The fact that I'm sitting here talking about my father after 30 years and going over those memories, remembering those images, indicates that the pain has

not been treated and that the treatment is not all that easy: It must first be recognized and accepted.

My friends and I must realize and recognize that what we went through was a very serious and consequential blow that has penetrated deep inside our minds, and that we are all sick now. This is not severe depression but trauma, and it requires special treatment. It needs to be addressed. Otherwise, it will just be transferred down the line to the next generations."

Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:  
<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3584>

### Anonymous – Sister

*Ethnically Kurdish Iranian woman whose brother was executed on security charges when she was a teenager.*



"The news of my brother's execution traumatized me so much that I just cried day and night and was incapable of doing anything; I did not even eat properly. I was generally just sad and silent. Then I went to a general doctor who sent me to a psychologist, who told me the conditions might put pressure on my brain; I guess not enough blood was getting to my brain. He said that the trauma had caused that...

My other problem is the fear that has taken root in me. Even now that I live in a European country, the few times that I went to the police on some business, I was filled with fear and would forget my words and what I wanted to say. I talked about this to the psychologist several times and I was told that this fear had somehow been deeply instilled in my mind...

**My other problem is the fear that has taken root in me. Even now that I live in a European country, the few times that I went to the police on some business, I was filled with fear and would forget my words and what I wanted to say.**

The foundation of our family was destroyed after my brother's execution. My sister recounted that after they had taken my brother's body home, his daughter, who was two years and a few months old at the time had asked: "Why is he sleeping?" and she would constantly go to her father's corpse and call him "Aso, Aso," and would ask my mother: "Why isn't he waking up?" She still remembers the agents that were around our house that day. Every time she talks to me, she says, "Years after that tragedy, I'm still extremely scared every time I see a police officer."

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*

**Owdeh Afravi**

*An ethnically Arab Iranian whose son Ali was executed in March 2006 on security charges*

"I wish they had only conducted a public trial for him. I wish they had observed due process and allowed him to have an attorney so he could defend himself. I wish we could have gotten him an attorney who could have defended him. I wish they had given him time to truly say the things he wanted to say. He had no attorney and no one had any news of him, no contact, no calls to the family, no visitation, nothing, nothing...They did everything themselves: [They tried him], they hanged him, and they buried him, and they do not answer to anyone. This is the biggest pain and the worst stress anyone can endure; I don't think there is anything worse in the world."

*Testimony collected by the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center:*  
<https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/2758>

**Shirin Alamhouli**

"I was arrested in April 2008 and was taken directly to the headquarters of the Sepah. As soon as we arrived there, and before I was asked any questions, they began beating me. I was there for 25 days, of which I was on hunger strike for 22 days. I suffered all types of physical and mental torture. The interrogators were men who beat me badly. At that time, I could not even

speaking Farsi well, and so if their questions remained unanswered, they would start beating me again. One time I was beaten so severely that I began bleeding....I was taken to a hospital and was given a shot of some type of a drug, after which I would repeat whatever they wanted me to say, and they recorded everything.”

*Testimony collected by PBS, cited by the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide.*

## Zeinab Sekaanvand

“Zeinab was born into a poor Kurdish family. At age 15, she ran away from her family with the hope of finding a better life. She married a man who soon became violent and abusive. Her brother-in-law also began to rape her. Although she filed several reports with the police, they did nothing to protect Zeinab’s safety or investigate the allegations she had made against her husband or brother-in-law. When Zeinab asked her husband for a divorce, he refused. She tried to return to her family, but they disowned her. Then, in February 2012, Zeinab was arrested at the age of 17 for the murder of her husband.

After a 20-day interrogation in which she was beaten by the police and denied a lawyer, she signed a ‘confession’. When finally appointed a lawyer at the final hearing of her trial, Zeinab told the court that her confession had been coerced and that she wanted to retract it, alleging instead that it was her brother-in-law who had actually committed the crime with which she was charged. The court disregarded this, sentencing her to death despite her status as a juvenile offender and the illegitimate confession being the only shred of evidence against her.”

*Testimony collected by Amnesty International.*

## Malawi

### Gerald Banda

*A 41-year-old man who was sentenced to death in 2016. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 2022, and he has spent 11 years in prison. He has maintained his innocence before and after his conviction.*

“I was working hard as a fisherman when suddenly my life changed one night. I was walking home when I passed four men who accused me of rape and murder and took me to the village chief. I denied any involvement because I knew nothing about the crime. I was persistent in my denial, so they tied my legs together with leg irons and beat me with a belt on my legs, back and neck.

**The police hit me all over my body, including my head. The beatings lasted for three days. Even though I was bleeding, I was never taken to the hospital.**

about the crime. I was persistent in my denial, so they tied my legs together with leg irons and beat me with a belt on my legs, back and neck.

I was then taken to the police station where I was beaten again—this time, by police officers who told me repeatedly to confess. I was beaten with a belt, baton sticks, a whip and

a sharp object. The police hit me all over my body, including my head. The beatings lasted for three days. Even though I was bleeding, I was never taken to the hospital.

Eleven years later, I still have a painful ankle, scars on my back and a knot on my head from the torture I suffered. Due to the restrictive life on death row, I often feel like I'm becoming numb. When my sentence was commuted, I felt a little hope, but life remains difficult in prison. We face frequent food and water shortages, and we have been forced to go without food for numerous days this year."

*Testimony collected by Reprive.*

## Malaysia

### Angelia Selvam

*Angelia is the sister of Pannir Selvam, a Malaysian inmate condemned to death in Singapore. Pannir was sentenced to the death penalty for drug trafficking in 2017. His execution was originally scheduled to take place in May 2019 but was postponed at the last minute. He is still waiting for his new date of execution.*

"The traumatic journey for our family began right from the start of the case, when we had to search for suitable lawyers in a foreign country. Pannir went through nearly six different lawyers since 2014. The pressure on middle-income families like ours is immense, especially considering that Singapore's higher money exchange rates are unbearable. We witnessed the unsettling reality of how this unjust law operates, leaving us lost trust in the legal justice system. Finding a lawyer willing to take on such cases is incredibly challenging in Singapore. We and other families experienced sleepless nights upon learning that the lawyer's license had been revoked, preventing them from representing the vulnerable death row inmates.

**The weight of this terrible law on our shoulders is unfathomable. Must a person endure any additional suffering beyond this?"**

The most unforgettable terrifying moment occurred in 2019, during the week from May 17th to May 23rd. Pannir's scheduled execution was set for May 24th, 2019. It was an emotional turmoil beyond words. We were so overwhelmed that we could barely have the strength to enter the courtroom and take our seats.

A sense of powerlessness consumed us, as we realized we were unable to prevent or alter the situation. Physically present but mentally besieged, our souls pleaded with God for a miracle. We grappled with feelings of guilt as parents, siblings, and family members, even though we knew we were not responsible for the actions that led Pannir to receive the death sentence. Quietly, we questioned ourselves, if we could have done anything differently to prevent the circumstances that led to this heartbreaking outcome. Even now, we live with the constant fear and trauma that if he loses the case, Pannir could face execution. It is agonizing to accept the fact that it has been more than a decade since my brother last enjoyed a home-cooked meal, and it has been just as long since we touched and hugged him. He is deprived of exposure to sunlight and fresh air, he is subjected to an isolated and oppressive environment, deprived of basic human dignity. The weight of this terrible law on our shoulders is unfathomable. Must a person endure any additional suffering beyond this?"

*Testimony collected by Parliamentarians for Global Action.*

# Pakistan

## Kanizan Bibi - Father

"Kanizan began working as a housemaid for a rich, landowning family. She was little more than a child herself. It is no wonder that she quickly befriended the very children she was charged with taking care of, the children of Muhammad Khan...Kanizan had played with those children, loved them, cared for them.

She would tell me all about them. When she heard of their killing, she was utterly distraught...Kanizan spent nights trapped in a jail cell with strangers. When I went to see her, they didn't let me meet her.

They hung her from a fan with ropes thicker than her tiny wrists, beating her small frame with all their might. They let mice loose in her pants, which they tied from the ankles so that they could not escape. Kanizan had been terrified of mice her whole life.

They electrocuted her repeatedly. I can only hope that she fainted during this ordeal. This is how I comfort myself as a father, forcing myself to believe that my daughter was not conscious during this abuse. When they had broken her, they forced her to sign a confession. It's not difficult to see how her mind gave up on her.

I didn't have the money to go see her for her trial. I did not even know that she had been sentenced to death until much later. I borrowed money from everywhere. Whenever I [had] enough, I would try to find my way to her...I'm a poor man. I can't do anything in return. But I humbly beg you to find it in your heart to grant mercy to a poor woman who has spent almost her life in jail. Her silence shouldn't silence what you can do for her."

*This is an excerpt of the letter of Kanizan Bibi's father taken from Dawn: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1400952>, Apr 21, 2018*

**They electrocuted her repeatedly. I can only hope that she fainted during this ordeal. This is how I comfort myself as a father, forcing myself to believe that my daughter was not conscious during this abuse.**

# Taiwan

## Death Row Inmate A

"Are you saying that if the 38 of us get executed, there won't be any more crimes outside? That's just a bunch of nonsense. The thing is, I think the death penalty is meaningless because I've experienced it. Back in 1977-1978, they executed nearly a hundred people every year, but did society get safer? No, it didn't. Actually, society is at its best now because there are too many surveillance cameras, and people know they'll get caught if they commit crimes, so they don't do it. I think this kind of deterrence is effective. A high clearance rate is what makes it work!"

*Testimony collected by the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty.*

### Death Row Inmate B

"Our system isn't gonna let us, death row inmates, prove our worth. Even if they want me to go to war or guard nuclear waste, I can do it. We don't wanna be a useless person, you know what I mean? We all need that independent process to contribute and prove ourselves. That's the real value of life. We can't just live day by day and have our food and sleep like a dog in prison till death.

**We make mistakes, but they should give us a chance to change our lives. But the government doesn't, that's why I'm pessimistic.**

If they gave me a chance to read books for ten years, I might be a doctor by now; maybe then I would have value and [could] take on some responsibilities. Not just like a dog being fed. I want to serve my time with dignity. However, we are often treated badly and can't even choose when to die. It's really sad. Even if

we die on the battlefield today, it's fine, at least we did something. But the government puts us in prison and tortures us for a long time, and we contribute nothing. We make mistakes, but they should give us a chance to change our lives. But the government doesn't; that's why I'm pessimistic."

*Testimony collected by the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty.*

### Death Row Inmate C

"Some folks might say it doesn't matter much, every day alive is a day lived. But I say, I've been locked up for 20-some years now, been abused all [these] years, ain't that enough? If you got a goal though, like if you got a 30-year sentence, and you got to do 20-some years more, government give you a chance to get out of jail. If you don't do good and they catch you and lock you back up, it's your own damn fault. But me, I'm in my forties now, got 20-some years left to go. Even if my folks aren't around no more, as long as I still have my last breath, I'd still wanna go kneel down in front of my ma and pa's graves and ask for forgiveness for the wrongs I've done."

*Testimony collected by the Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty.*

## Tanzania

### Habiyalimana Augustino

*Augustino is a 52-year-old Burundian refugee who was sentenced to death in Tanzania in 2007. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 2020, and he has spent 24 years in prison. He has maintained his innocence before and after his conviction.*

"I fled Burundi during the civil war in 1995. For four years, I lived in a refugee camp with my brother. In the camp, we struggled to find safe housing and work. One day, I was selling dried cassava in the marketplace, when I was forcibly rounded up by Tanzanian police officers.

At the police station, I was beaten by police officers who threatened to continue beating me unless I confessed to a crime I knew nothing about. I was kept apart from other people and was never allowed to see a lawyer. For two days, I was kept awake while officers beat me and threatened to kill me if I did not provide a confession. I signed what they asked me to because I was afraid that I would die.

***For two days, I was kept awake while officers beat me and threatened to kill me if I did not provide a confession. I signed what they asked me to because I was afraid that I would die.***

Although I tried to withdraw the false confession at trial, my efforts were unsuccessful. I had no knowledge of the Tanzanian court system and was not familiar with the language. When I was sentenced to death, I felt worried and afraid that I would never see my family in Burundi again. My biggest hope now is that I will be able to go back home and see my family."

*Testimony collected by Reprieve.*

### Miburo Abdulkarim

*Abdulkarim is a 46-year-old Burundian refugee who was sentenced to death in Tanzania in 2007. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 2020, and he has spent 24 years in prison. He has maintained his innocence before and after his conviction.*

"I fled Burundi almost 30 years ago to escape being killed by militia groups. I was only 16 years old when I fled by myself to a Rwandan refugee camp. When militia groups reached the camps, I was forced to flee again. After years of running and trying to find my family, I ended up in a Tanzanian refugee camp and was living by myself as a teenage refugee.

***Police officers beat me repeatedly and told me that the beatings would not stop unless I confessed to a crime I did not commit.***

I survived by giving rides to people on my bike. One day, I was dropping off a customer when I was rounded up by the police. At the police station, I was kept apart from other people and was deprived of sleep for two days. Police officers beat me repeatedly and told me that the beatings would not

stop unless I confessed to a crime I did not commit. They used sticks, a wooden club and the butt of a gun. I was desperate for the beatings to stop, so I gave in to their demands.

At trial, I asked to withdraw my confession and said that I was beaten and threatened. However, I had no familiarity with the court system in Tanzania nor did I know the language. I was sentenced to death and have spent over 24 years in prison without hope of finding my family again.

I still have scars on my stomach and foot from the torture I suffered. I have come to live with the bad memories of what happened to me, but I am still sometimes unable to sleep due to flashbacks. More than anything, I feel alone. I have been away from my family for 30 years now. I am worried that I will never be able to go back to Burundi again.”

*Testimony collected by Reprive.*

### **Nzigiyimana Zabron**

*Zabron is a 45-year-old Burundian refugee who was sentenced to death in Tanzania in 2012. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 2020, and he has spent 19 years in prison. He has maintained his innocence before and after his conviction.*

“I fled to Tanzania almost 30 years ago with my parents and siblings during the Burundian Civil War. We lived in a refugee camp, and my parents sadly passed away during our time there.

One day, I needed to go to the police station to get a permit to seek medical attention for a serious cut on my hand. At that time, all refugees had to get special permits to leave the camp. At the police station, officers arrested me and started questioning me about a crime that I knew nothing about. Police officers started beating me with a wooden club and their fists. They threatened to cut off my genitals if I refused to provide a confession. Despite the beating I had, I was never taken to a hospital or seen by a doctor.

**At trial, I tried to introduce the fact that I was tortured, but the court still used the false confession against me.**

At trial, I tried to introduce the fact that I was tortured, but the court still used the false confession against me. I had no idea how to navigate through the Tanzanian court system, and I did not know the language. I could not present any evidence or witnesses because 7 years had passed since my arrest, and everyone, including my siblings, had returned to Burundi.

I still have scars on my body from the torture. I try not to think about the events I suffered through. When I do, my heartbeat quickens. Right now, I am focused on my hopes to return back to Burundi. I wish to see my siblings again, who I have not seen for decades.”

*Testimony collected by Reprive.*

## **United States of America**

### **Gabi Uhl**

*Gabi is the Chairperson of the German Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, who witnessed three executions by the state of Texas.*

“The death penalty only creates new suffering. Experience shows that in most cases the relatives of the victims unfortunately do not find peace through the execution of the perpetrator. Instead, suffering and pain is inflicted on another family - the relatives of the



perpetrator. Several times on the day of an execution, I looked into the faces of those whose father, brother, son had their lives taken away by state violence. I witnessed their despair, saw the abysmal horror in their eyes.

**The death penalty only created more hurt and grief - a trauma that will accompany the perpetrator's relatives for the rest of their lives.**

I will never forget how the son of a perpetrator almost collapsed, writhing as if in serious pain in his despair, barely two hours later having to witness the intentional and deliberate killing of his father. It was heartbreaking. The young man had lost his mother to the crime as a young child of

just two years old, because it was a family drama, and now, a good 20 years later, his father was taken from him as well.

"Can't we ask the governor, if I can hug my father at least once?", he had asked a few days earlier with almost childlike naiveté. All these years he had only ever seen his father on death row through a pane of glass. The son was allowed to touch his father for the first time only when he lay dead on a stretcher, after being legally executed by the state.

No one gained anything from the violent killing of the father by state-sanctioned execution, nor did it make the world a bit better. The death penalty only created more hurt and grief - a trauma that will accompany the perpetrator's relatives for the rest of their lives."

*Testimony collected by the German Coalition Against the Death Penalty.*

**Sunny Jacobs**

*Sunny is in a unique position of having been sentenced to death, of being the wife of someone who was sentenced to death and ultimately executed, and of being the wife of someone who was sentenced to death, and survived to be released.*

"My experience of being sentenced to death was different than the men's, because I was, at the time, the only woman with a sentence of death. I was held in solitary confinement, in complete isolation. So I did not have to experience my friends of many years, [being taken] into the death chamber, and then smelling their burning flesh for three days afterwards. I was spared the horrors of that. Instead, I was completely on my own, with no one to talk with, and no one with whom to interact, share my feelings, or find comfort.

At first, I lived in fear of them, coming into my cell to kill me. No one would have known because there was no one there. Every time you hear footsteps coming down the hallway and it's not meal time you wonder if they are coming to serve you your death warrant instead. I wrote my thoughts and my feelings, a little scraps of paper, so I would have something to leave behind for my children in case they did take my life.

**They take away all sense of meaning, and all hope. Immediately upon arriving, they take away your identity and give you a number. This is part of the dehumanization process that is necessary if they are going to participate in taking your life.**

You are not allowed to work, and medical and dental care are minimal because, after all, you are going to die anyway. They take away all sense of meaning, and all hope. Immediately upon arriving, they take away your identity and give you a number. This is part of the dehumanization process that is necessary if they are going to participate in taking your life. So now you are not a person any longer, you are a number. Many years later, when I was campaigning against the death penalty in Texas, we went to the graveyard, where they buried the men who were executed, and had no family to claim them. To my heart, they were numbers. Even in death, they were not given the dignity of their name.”

*Testimony collected by the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty.*

### Mumia Abu-Jamal

“Few people really know the nature of death rows. It is used as a political prop by politicians and is thus a stepping-stone to the gateway of power. But death row is far more than that. It is a place where men and women and, until recently, even juveniles were sent to live and die in aching loneliness and despair. That’s because death row was specifically designed to isolate people, physically and psychologically—torture not only for the inmates, but also for their families.

**On death row, American law reconstructed a caste of the untouchables where no one was allowed to touch them, not a child, not a parent or even one’s very spouse, who visited you in a walled-in cage, separated by a glass wall depriving you of all human contact.**

On death row, American law reconstructed a caste of the untouchables where no one was allowed to touch them, not a child, not a parent or even one’s very spouse, who visited you in a walled-in cage, separated by a glass wall depriving you of all human contact. But that’s not all. You were even isolated from other people on death row. You were in solitary confinement, locked in a cell alone for 23 hours a day until you were executed or left death row. Many, perhaps most, men spent

decades under such conditions. I, myself, survived death row for 28 years.

Why is such torture possible? Because the state, by creating such extreme conditions, sought to turn people into a kind of living dead, so broken that actual death would be but a relief. That fever against which your coalition is fighting seems to be breaking, at least in Pennsylvania. Here, today, we see a much smaller death row where the number of prisoners has fallen to around a hundred, and men spend over eight hours a day out of their cells. They have contact visits. Now, the state will no longer sign death warrants and is seeking the abolition of the death penalty, as has been the case in several American states. The tide has turned, and death row is no longer the death row of cruel memory.

However, there remains one unanswered question as many prisoners whose execution is cancelled see their death sentences transformed into life without parole. This is a second death penalty as you are still condemned to die in prison, with no hope whatsoever of freedom, unless you obtain a reversal of your condemnation or clemency in view of your state of health, both of which are nearly impossible to obtain.”

*Testimony collected by Free Mumia ! French Support Group (Collectif français "Libérons Mumia !").*

### **Joaquin Martinez**

*Joaquin was on death row in Florida as he was innocently sentenced to death for a double murder in Florida in 1997 at the age of 24. During his several years of imprisonment, the European Union, King Juan Carlos and Pope John Paul II, among others, lobbied for his release until he was finally released in 2001. Since then, Joaquin has testified against the death penalty on many occasions, including events together with Sant'Egidio and the World Coalition. He is the first Spaniard and European to be exonerated from death row in the United States of America.*

“Growing up, I never once thought I would find myself speaking out against the death penalty. I was raised to believe that the death penalty served some type of purpose and obviously never questioned it. It was the law and, quite honestly, to say “no to the death penalty” was considered in many places anti-American. Besides, no one innocent could be sentenced to death. The system works, or so I thought.

I often criticized this same system for the amount of time it took for a death-row inmate to be executed. I didn't understand how a process could take so long to carry out an execution. I was strongly in favor of the death penalty and against anyone that tried to put an end to it.

**I only pray that this same support I received can also be sent to all those that remain on death row. Believe me when I say they really need to feel someone out here cares for them and that they are not and will never be alone.”**

In due time I found myself in a situation where I needed support and found myself alone, innocent, and yet sentenced to death.

No one can imagine the suffering my family and I went through while I was on death row. The loneliness I felt when I first arrived and all those family gatherings I missed out on. Ironically, those I had criticized, those on death row, were the first ones to show their support towards me and those who work to abolish the death penalty were now standing by my side. I often think back on those days and recall how important it was to receive all those letters and support. I don't know what life would have been like on death row without all the love from the outside world. I only pray that this same support I received can also be sent to all those that remain on death-row. Believe me when I say they really need to feel someone out here cares for them and that they are not and will never be alone.”

*Testimony collected by Sant'Egidio.*

"In 1973, I was falsely accused of a murder I did not commit. I spent 8 years trying to prove my innocence and endured four trials before I was acquitted. The torture of the years I spent on death row remains with me. A death sentence is not only physical torture, it's psychological, knowing you are going to be executed.

**I tell them to think of every day of your life as the worst day you have ever experienced – that's every day on death row.**

Even years later, as I enjoy time with my children and grandchildren and spend time outside with my wife, I think of death row, every day. I look at my children and look at my wife and say what if California would've had their way? I wouldn't be here today with them. I work to end the death penalty and to help other exonerees who have suffered as I did, so that hopefully someday no one will have to endure the torture of capital punishment. When I speak to audiences, and I like especially to talk with young people, I tell them to think of every day of your life as the worst day you have ever experienced – that's every day on death row."

*Testimony collected by Witness to Innocence.*

"As a wrongfully convicted death-row survivor, I am all too familiar with the flaws in our criminal justice system and the struggle to survive in the world outside after spending time in prison. I spent a total of eight years, 10 months and 19 days in prison for a brutal crime I did not commit. In 1993 I was finally exonerated by DNA evidence, becoming the first person exonerated by DNA evidence from death row and the 48th of 191 death row exonerees since 1973 in the United States.

After my exoneration, I am grateful to have had the resources to run my own business, to get involved in the work for death penalty abolition, and to have served as Executive Director for Witness to Innocence.

Unfortunately, many of my peers are not as fortunate. The physical, psychological and social effects of spending time on death row persist after incarceration, and most death row exonerees receive little compensation for time lost to wrongful conviction.

**Years of incarceration have grave impacts on physical and mental health. We entered prison young and healthy, and returned to the outside world years later with chronic health problems, and having accumulated no social security benefits.**

Years of incarceration have grave impacts on physical and mental health. We entered prison young and healthy, and returned to the outside world years later with chronic health problems, and having accumulated no social security benefits.

As we get older, we face the same needs of all aging people, plus the added burden of poor nutrition and medical care while in prison, lack of resources once outside prison, high incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and lack of experience living in the world in general. Death row nearly took our lives, and it left us with lasting physical, emotional and social scars we will never forget.”

*Testimony collected by Witness to Innocence.*

### Debra Milke

“In 1989, I was a single young mother, with a four-year-old son, when my life was forever changed. My son went to the mall with a friend to go see Santa Claus, but he never came back. Instead, hours later I was taken into an interrogation room and told the heartbreaking news that my precious son was found murdered, and that I was under arrest.

**No one should have to experience this kind of injustice, to face death for a crime they didn’t commit. My freedom is bittersweet, as that pain is still**

A homicide detective interrogated me. He lied and said I confessed, but had no tapes, witnesses, or a signed statement to prove it, the only evidence was his word against mine. No one told me that he had a history of misconduct. I was distraught, and his lies and the cover-ups perpetuated by the system cost me decades of my life.

Knowing I was innocent, I always believed the day would come when I would be freed. I just didn’t think it would take 23 years, nine months and three days to rectify such a blatant miscarriage of justice. My heart still aches for my son. No one should have to experience this kind of injustice, to face death for a crime they didn’t commit. My freedom is bittersweet, as that pain is still with me. Killing those who killed my son will not bring him back or take away that pain. That is why I continue to speak out against the death penalty, and for other reforms that will hopefully make it less likely for someone to be wrongfully convicted and to have to suffer as I did.”

*Testimony collected by Witness to Innocence.*

### Melissa Lucio

*Melissa Lucio is on Texas’s death row, convicted of the 2007 murder of her two-year-old daughter.*

“Melissa was subjected to a five-hour, late-night, carefully orchestrated and aggressive interrogation until she said, “I guess I did it. I’m responsible.” Melissa’s wrongful conviction and death sentence followed decades of interpersonal violence that she endured at the hands of relatives and partners.

Freshly grieving the loss of her daughter and still numb with shock, Melissa was hauled into an interrogation room where armed, male police officers stood over her, yelling, berating, and accusing her of causing her daughter's death. She repeatedly told them she had not killed her child. Still, the officers pressured her.

They applied coercive maximization and minimization interrogation techniques that are notorious for their tendency to produce false confessions, particularly when applied to suggestible people such as those with cognitive impairments and trauma survivors.

After five hours of interrogation, Melissa grew increasingly emotionally and physically exhausted.

Finally, in response to a Texas Ranger's repeated demands and exhortations that she admit responsibility for Mariah's injuries, Melissa acquiesced, stating, "I guess I did it."

According to experts, Melissa's lifetime of sexual abuse, starting at six years old, and domestic violence at the hands of two partners, made her extremely vulnerable and susceptible to falsely confessing during an interrogation by male police officers, some armed, and one impliedly threatening to "beat [her] half to death like that little child was beat."

*Testimony collected by the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide:*  
<https://deathpenaltyworldwide.org/advocacy/melissa-lucio>

**Randal Padgett**

"A few years back, I went with my coworkers to see the movie "Just Mercy", the story about Attorney Bryan Stevenson and his client Walter McMillian. Bryan helped win Walter's freedom from years on the same death row where I had spent time before my own exoneration.

My colleagues and I went as a group to the movie because we were about to send tickets to other exonerees like myself, and we wanted to be prepared for how it might affect people. After the film ended, we sat in the theatre, through the credits, until the lights went on and they started sweeping up the place. I told one of my colleagues that I needed time to sit because the film had just taken me right back there to death row, although in the movie the row looked a lot cleaner than it was in reality; you couldn't see the rats or feel the hundred plus heat with no relief.

**Death row changes you completely as a person, even as you rebuild your life.**

Some of the sounds and sights of that film took me back to that place I never imagined I'd be before I knew from personal experience that our system could convict an innocent person and sentence them to die. Death row changes you completely as a person, even as you rebuild your life.

I like my work as a Peer Specialist for Witness to Innocence because I get to stay in touch with like-minded people who went through what I went through, and to help them navigate life outside. And I speak so that others will see how flawed our system is, that what happened to

me, can happen to anyone, so we have to end the death penalty.”

*Testimony collected by Witness to Innocence.*

**Ralph “Ron” Wright Jr.**

“Before I was wrongfully incarcerated on death row, I was an Air Force Sergeant and Orange County Deputy Sheriff. There was no forensic evidence, weapon, cell records, or testimony given to incriminate me, except a black glove of the same kind issued to my military unit. And with that, analysts were uncertain if it came from my military base. Independent DNA analyses by labs hired by both the defense and prosecution excluded me.

I was convicted solely on the basis of potential motive and opportunity; and a non-unanimous jury vote of 7-5 recommended the death penalty. The Florida Supreme Court later declared death sentences based upon non-unanimous jury recommendations to be unconstitutional, but allowing non-unanimous jury votes has just been reintroduced by the Florida legislature. In May 2017, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that all evidence against me was “purely circumstantial” and there was no evidence to prove I was the murderer.

I was acquitted of the murder charges and became the 27th person to be exonerated from death row in Florida. As a former law enforcement officer, I know the death penalty is not a deterrent, and it is not the answer to reducing or preventing crime. It is important to me to speak out against the death penalty so that people can see how even someone who is innocent could be put to death in our system.”

*Testimony collected by Witness to Innocence.*

**Christa Pike**

“The following example demonstrates the devastating isolation of a woman on death row. In 1996, Christa Pike was sentenced to death for a murder she committed at age 18. At age 20, she became (and remains) the youngest woman ever sent to death row in the United States. Christa has been on death row in Tennessee for 26 years, at least 25 of which she has spent in solitary confinement.

**Decades of solitary confinement have aggravated her pre-existing psychological and physical conditions, and she has developed new ones, including obsessive-compulsive disorder.**

She spends 22 to 24 hours per day in a cell that is approximately 2.5 x 3 metres. As a result, her eyesight has deteriorated, and her overall mobility has decreased. On weekdays, she is allowed to take ‘recreation’ for an hour in an outdoor cage with concrete flooring measuring about 5 x 9 metres.

She is excluded from all prison group activities, including religious services. For years at a time, she has been prohibited from receiving so-called ‘contact visits’, meaning that a glass panel separates her from all visitors. Decades of solitary confinement have aggravated her pre-existing psychological and physical conditions, and she has developed new ones, including obsessive-compulsive disorder (I-10; I-11). Her lawyers explain that she has ‘struggled continuously with thoughts of suicide and self-harm



due to the hopeless and stark nature of her life’.”

*Testimony collected by Monash University, Eleos Justice and the Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide.*

## Zimbabwe

### Army Zulu

“On November 7, 2001, around 01:15 am, I was asleep with my wife and 10-year-old daughter when we heard a hard knock on our front door. The voice behind the door claimed to be the police, although they carried no identification and were not in uniform.

**I was then taken to solitary confinement and these officers continued to torture me for three more months, using baton sticks, subjecting me to icy water, and taunting me with the threat of being hanged.**

I opened the door and I was greeted by a series of kicks as I was [threw] to the ground by these men. My wife and daughter were crying helplessly as they watched me get beaten. They handcuffed me and forcefully thrown me into a white police truck, which joined other trucks in a convoy as we headed towards the neighborhood police station.

At arrival, I was taken to a dark room for interrogation, unaware of the reason for my arrest. Six plainclothes men who identified themselves as members of the Central Intelligence Organization coerced me into confessing to the murder of a prominent politician named Cain Nkala. In fear and pain, I falsely confessed, signing a written statement they had prepared.

Still handcuffed and now in leg irons, I was subjected to brutal beatings with baton sticks. Afterwards, I was taken to Grey Prison, where for 48 hours, I had no access to my family or legal representation.

I was then taken to solitary confinement and these officers continued to torture me for three more months, using baton sticks, subjecting me to icy water, and taunting me with the threat of being hanged.

Eventually, I was released on bail and put under house arrest for a year, causing immense fear for my family. I managed to get legal assistance, and my case was taken to court, alleging wrongful arrest, torture, and a year-long house arrest. Surprisingly, the prosecution failed to present any evidence linking me to the murder, resulting in my acquittal.”

*Testimony collected by Parliamentarians for Global Action.*