



INSECURITY REVEALED: Voices Against the Death Penalty

World Day Against the Death Penalty
10 October 2024 - 2025
Security and the death penalty

**THE DEATH PENALTY
PROTECTS NO ONE.
ABOLISH IT NOW.**



10 OCTOBER, 2024-2025
**WORLD DAY AGAINST
THE DEATH PENALTY**

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This document has been compiled by the Secretariat of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty with substantial aid from member organizations, including the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (ABC), Coalition of Somali Human Rights Defenders (CSHRD), Abolition Death Penalty in Iraq, Centre d'Observation des Droits de l'Homme et d'Assistance Sociale (CODHAS), National Tunisian Coalition Against the Death Penalty (CTCPM), Sant'Egidio, Sunny Jacobs Foundation, and Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP).

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, or indicated in brackets.

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

Content warning: Testimonials include mention of torture, sexual violence, sexual violence on minors, suicide and murder. Reader discretion advised.

VOICES OF VICTIMS' FAMILIES

Khedija Arfaou (Tunisia)

Academic, feminist and abolitionist activist and founding member of the CTCPM, who shared her story.



When I learned that my son, he was my youngest, Dali and his wife, had been murdered along with 37 other people, in Istanbul, on the first of January 2017, I don't know how... I didn't even cry! I was so stunned. Several people were saying, "Ah, if I catch him [the person who murdered Dali and his wife], I'll kill him!" No, my concern was not to kill the one who had killed, because no one has the right to kill. Only God has the right, only God gives life and death. That's the way I see it. Will killing these criminals bring the dead back to life? No. I'm against the death penalty. I'm not going to be like, I saw a case, where the father of a child who was killed, [who] went to kiss his son's murderer, I won't go that far. I can never forgive the man who killed my children, I can never forgive him. But I don't want him executed. There's life imprisonment... A country like the United States, where the death penalty doesn't exist in all states, but in the majority that they have... we mustn't follow the example of the United States. **I was and remain fundamentally and consciously against the death penalty.**

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Because my grandmother died in a robbery, suffering from a head injury and intracranial bleeding, and eventually left us due to brain death. At that time, and even now, I also had the urge to seek revenge. The desire for revenge stems from the deep hurt I experienced, which is the expression of a victim. I am not sure if I have overcome the pain, as I still shed tears when mentioning this matter.

My anger made me choose to study law, hoping to delve into criminal law. At that time, I thought that punishing the wrongdoers meant studying criminal law. However, after entering university and studying criminal law, I realized that most legal professionals are cautious when it comes to the defendants. Through the process of studying law, I gradually understood the reasons and context of crimes. If we examine the life experiences of each defendant, they may have been victims to some extent or in other events. The causes of crimes, whether near or far, are often related to the repressed, frustrated, unaccepted, marginalized, discriminated, or victimized experiences of the perpetrators.

Through this learning process, I have transformed my hatred towards "criminals" into sighs for the past lives of the "defendants," and I am able to take the "causes of crime" more seriously. **The death penalty would obscure the pursuit of the causes of crime, leading us to mistakenly believe that the victims have been supported.**

Since we do not believe that individuals can kill, why does the state suddenly have the power to kill when citizens hand over power to the state? In fact, we have elevated and sanctified the status of the state too much. The power of the state actually comes from the people, and we do not have the right to kill to delegate to the state, so the state does not have the right to kill.



Essen Lee (Taiwan)

Lawyer and a victim's family. His story was shared by the TAEDP.

Safieh (Iran)

Mother of Setayesh Ghoreishi, a six-year-old Afghan girl who was raped and murdered in 2016. Amirhossein Pourjafar, who was 16 at the time of the crime, was put to death after being found guilty on 2018. Her story was shared by ABC.

After Amirhossein was executed, we didn't hear a word from anyone. We thought Amirhossein's execution would bring us closure, but the day he was put to death was like the day we found out Setayesh had been killed as she had and was no longer with us. Things were just that bad, and it's not brought us even a bit of peace. **Maybe if we could go back, knowing that executing Amirhossein wouldn't fix anything, we would have pardoned him and he wouldn't have been put to death.** [...] We can't tell people in situations like ours what to do, but the execution of Amirhossein hasn't made things better for us and hasn't changed a thing. All that's happened is that Amirhossein's blood has been spilled.

VOICES OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS

I am pleased to learn that the theme of this year's World Day Against the Death Penalty is that "The Death Penalty Protects No One." That reality is perhaps the biggest reason why I began to study the use of the death penalty and learned that the death penalty does not offer anyone any protection from violent behavior. While violent behavior must be controlled, the death penalty is not the answer. In my experience as a law enforcement officer for almost 40 years, sworn to protect victims of violent crime, I once thought that the death penalty was a just punishment and would help murder victims' family members, and would protect future potential victims from the horrible consequences of losing a loved one. I also thought it would bring peace to those who were victims of murder. I was wrong! As I continued my journey for answers, I learned many very important truths about the death penalty. Please allow me to share two of those realities here:

1. The death penalty creates more victims than it helps. This is because everyone involved in the death penalty process is traumatized. This includes the people that I was sworn to protect: the family members of those murdered, who undergo excruciating pain while being dragged through the death penalty process, promised that they will "feel better" and experience "closure" after the person responsible for the death of their loved one is executed. It doesn't work that way. In fact, many surviving family members now work to end the death penalty because they were harmed so greatly during the process. The death penalty brought more pain to their lives and prevented them from overcoming their loss.

2. The death penalty does not prevent future murders and is not a deterrent to murder. In the United States, states that have a death penalty have higher rates of murder than states that don't have a death penalty. Also, more police officers are murdered in states that have a death penalty than those that don't.



George Kain (United States of America)

Former police commissioner in Connecticut, he worked in law enforcement for over 40 years. His story was shared by Comunità di Sant'Egidio.

I had always thought that having a death penalty would help to keep me safe, because a potential murderer would think twice about killing a police officer in a state that had a death penalty. Again, it just doesn't work that way. Therefore, we need to rethink that having a death penalty will protect people from the possibility of becoming a victim of a violent crime. **The evidence shows that the death penalty creates more victims and doesn't prevent future murders.**

Anonymous - prison guards (Iran)

The following stories were shared by ABC. All brackets indicating changes in the text were made by ABC upon submission.

[the prisoners on death row] were very sad and would cry...In a natural death, the person does not know when they would die, but in executions, the anticipation of death is very difficult. [Like the case of X]. He knew he would be executed in a few hours and was in a very bad condition. They did not let him see his wife and kid. [...] I got the number from him and informed his family. At the end of the night, they took him from [the clinic] and in that section in the visitation room they executed him... That night I could not sleep. Not only that night, but for weeks and months, this nightmare was with me, that right in front of my eyes they took the inmate there and executed him...The stress of working in prison resulted in me having no sleep at night and I had a depression... **[they] can replace executions with better sentences, but [they] do not have the right to decide for somebody else and cut them off from life.**

Prison Guard who served in two prisons in Iran as supervisor for a total nine years. ABC interviewed him on 7 January 2021.

[A 14-year-old boy who had accidentally caused his girlfriend's death] was kept in X prison until he reached the age of 17 and then he was sent to X prison and kept there for almost a year. When he reached the age of 18, a crane came to the prison area, the prosecutor, the judge, and the victim's family were there, as well as the colleagues and the boy's family. My colleagues strongly urged the victim's family to forgive him. But they didn't. The mother didn't forgive, and she put the rope around the boy's neck. And the crane [used as scaffolding for a make shift gallows] pulled him up after a button was pressed... It is not pleasant at all to see someone die up there. I only saw the killer's family and my colleagues begging the victim's family to no avail. My shift was over, and I left with my car. It was very sad. Later, when I came to X prison, someone was being executed every day. When we checked the statistics, we saw that such-and-such prisoner wasn't there, and they said that he was executed. It was very sad, and these acts gradually burn your spirit; seeing these scenes destroys a person. A prison guard becomes friends with a prisoner, whatever crime he has committed, whether he wants to or not, an emotional relationship develops between them. I have no problem with law enforcement. But when you see an execution, you become very upset... They have destroyed many colleagues' humanity. They used to be healthy educated people with big dreams, but they have entered this Prisons Organization, and they've been turned into strange creatures. They have seen executions, torture, floggings, and amputations. They are accustomed to these conditions, and nothing matters to them anymore and they only want to hang the person, take their wages, and go. **The Judicial system has divided people into two categories: one group devoid of feelings and conscience and the other group suffering [long lasting] tensions and stress.**

Prison Guard who served for about 11 years in three different prisons in Iran. ABC interviewed him on December 13, 2020.

I saw some very unpleasant scenes in those years. The people who were sentenced to be executed [...] would not let go of their children when visitation time was over. For example, they would cry, their kids wouldn't leave their arms ...I saw all the inmates' problems and their families and couldn't do anything for them, it was very painful for me...In one or two instances, I had to bring the corpse down myself because no one stayed to help [...] with all the sadness and pain. Because the [inmate] who I spoke to three days ago is now being executed in front of my eyes or I'm putting him inside the body bag myself to leave and never return. It was a very horrific scene. **These executions truly affected my life, my psyche and nerves, and it affected my everything.** Many times, when I came home, I could not eat [...] I was always someone who, between friends and acquaintances and family, was 100% identified as a happy person. I lost my spirits. I mean when I would come home, I was in my thoughts a lot of the time... sometimes I would not even leave the house. I mean, for up to two or three months, according to my family, I talked in my sleep, or I would shout in my sleep, and I was sad.

Prison guard employed for several years in a prison in Iran, where he oversaw visitations and accompanied inmates to Judicial or health centers. He was interviewed by ABC on November 22, 2018.

VOICES OF PEOPLE ON THE DEATH ROW

I'm the mother of two children, and two years ago I was sentenced to death in a trial in which I was unable to defend myself because I had no lawyer. I was accused of a criminal conspiracy and armed robbery, and was said to be one of the 40 thieves, a group of bandits accused of being responsible for the lack of security in the town of Goma.

I'm originally from Kisangani, I do not have any family here in Goma. After my conviction, I [couldn't] exhaust all avenues of appeal due to a lack of means, and my husband was making every effort to try and obtain my release.

When I did 10 months in prison, everything became different, my husband became distant, he started to limit his visits, when I called him on the phone he would sometimes say he was busy with work, he would come by the next day until he wasn't answering my calls anymore and he stopped visiting me altogether, then my phone had been confiscated by the prison services, I couldn't afford to pay the phone usage fees in prison anymore.

One day, by surprise, one of my neighbors came to visit a prisoner. She was surprised to see me alive, because my husband had told them I was already dead and had been buried without informing him. She told me that he had already married another woman, and that this woman mistreats my children and sometimes chases them out of the house.

When I imagine that I've been sentenced to death, my two daughters who are 15 and 12 have no peace, maybe they've already been raped or they've become prostitutes as they have nowhere to live, my in-laws can't take care of them, they're all irresponsible. **This is what makes me unhappy and what will hasten my death here in prison.** I'm doubly condemned to die in pain.

**Sifa Wembo
(Democratic
Republic of
Congo)**

Her story was shared
by CODHAS

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After spending four years in secret underground solitary confinement known as (Godka Jilicow); a name associated with brutality and torture, where even medical experiments are made on inmates like Pöschwies in Zurich, I gave up hope and submitted to their plans as I did everything they wanted me [...] to do, under the duress and the pain of the torture, I accepted their dictations to me. Sometime after the false confession, I was transferred to main jail in Mogadishu known as (GaalShire). At my first trial, on 19/09/2015, I told the truth to the judge and an eyewitness volunteered to tell the truth, despite the risks he could face, **I was able to convince the judge to set me free and to implicate officers at the behest of the security forces and that I had been coerced to do so under mental and physical torture.**

Mohamud Ali (Somalia)

A businessman in Bakara Market, he was accused of terrorism and links to Al-Shabab. His story was shared by CSHRD.



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I am the convict, Muhammad Attia Hussein, one of the four youths from Al-Aziziyah who were unjustly sentenced to death in connection the murder of a police officer, the martyr, Ali Abdul Hassan Shayesh, may God have mercy on him and this is my story....

A warrant was issued for my arrest in July 2021, along with 64 others, after participation in protests that broke out following the degradation of services, particularly electricity.

I turned myself in on 25 July and thought I would be treated like a human being, but since I first entered their dark cells, eyes closed, I have been confronted with several types of physical and psychological torture.

I didn't understand anything about the investigation, I only forcibly confessed to what I hadn't done.

The torture continued for 3 days, I was subjected to the worst tortures, my fingernails were removed, tortures were done with very strong electric shocks, stronger than the electricity I asked to be improved. They electrocuted me in sensitive places, the nerves were hit a lot including the penis, the ears and the neck, torture with water and also with a so-called Daechian method which was the worst; they used all their brutal methods, so much so that I fell to the ground unconscious, and as usual, they woke me up from my unconsciousness by pouring water and electric shocks in a way full of hatred, I was on the ground, my crushed head covered with blood.

To this day I don't know what I confessed to. If I had known, I would have told them whatever they wanted to hear to get me out of this hell. When an investigator read the accusations attributed to me, he threatened me "If you don't confess and sign, I'll call five men to harass you".



Muhammad Attia Hussein (Iraq)

His story, told by his brother, was shared by Abolition Death Penalty of Iraq.

After all this hell and torture from seven in the afternoon until four in the morning, I finally agreed and signed on a piece of paper that I don't know what's on it, and submitted my case to God.

I was taken to the judge in the morning, wearing winter clothes in July, a mask to hide the wounds on my mouth and nose, and socks to hide my toes, which had their nails pulled out.

They threatened me that if I changed my statements, they would torture me even more if I cried to the judge.

I did what was asked of me to save myself from torture, and despite this, I was subjected to the same torture on the second, third and fourth days, and without a lawyer.

My family was forbidden to appoint a lawyer, so I stayed 4 months. Despite the end of the investigation against me, those four months passed like four centuries during which I didn't see the light of the sun, the torture, abuse and indignity to which I was exposed on a daily basis degraded my humanity.

Every time the human rights teams visited us, the same charade was repeated, the officers became like angels with us, and when the human rights teams left, we returned to the same harsh treatment from those same angels.

After days of random arrests, the town rose up again because of the intimidation that had taken place and so the case was closed. The investigating officer said the case had been closed with me and three young men. The charges against us were: (Hussein Saddam Hashem) Malik Al-Rummanah (Abbas Ali Aziz) The grenade carrier (Muhammad Attia Hussein), the grenade conqueror (Kazem Hadi Kazem), the grenade thrower.

How can this be true when we don't even know each other and have had no previous relationship and aren't even friends on Facebook? How did we get into this arrangement after 45 days of death?

I was confronted by my family (the signs of torture were visible on me) who filed a complaint with the human rights committee who visited us, but we couldn't file a complaint due to the threat of the crime control officers.

After four months, on 2 November 2021 to be precise, we were transferred to Wasit police station. My family and the families of the other defendants have also filed a human rights complaint. We all have witnesses to prove our innocence of the charges against us.

The best evidence of our innocence is the footage from the power station cameras at the scene of the accident, but it has disappeared because it condemns the security forces for the excessive use of force and the firing of live ammunition, sound bombs and smoke bombs, which injured five demonstrators.

I and those who are with me first address our appeal and supplications to Almighty God, for He is the sustainer of the oppressed, then to the parties involved and to all those who can help us reveal the truth. **We seek only the truth. By asking the judiciary to examine our case and give us justice.**

All the evidence they have is a confession extracted from us by torture, without any material proof.

VOICES OF FAMILIES OF PEOPLE ON THE DEATH ROW

Anonymous (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Younger sister whose brother was sentenced to death. Her story was shared by CODHAS. This testimony contains a suicide note.

We were a close-knit, happy family until the death penalty ruined everything.

My older brother had been arrested during the curfew here in Goma, it was like a joke, we thought he was going to be released as we knew he wasn't a bandit or linked to any armed group. After a while, we began to hear that he would be condemned in a trial with bandits who were making the city of Goma insecure. Some lawyers started coming to the house to ask for money to assist my brother, but as my parents were too poor, they said they had to sell our field to find money to give to the lawyers.

As the sale took longer, we were informed that he had been sentenced to death and would never leave prison again. My parents had just sold the field and gave all the money to the prison officials to try to obtain his release, but it was too late. Then they both died in succession, as they had not obtained their son's release after selling their only field. When my brother learned that his parents had died, he also took his own life in prison. As we didn't yet know of his death, I went to the prison to visit my older brother. When I arrived at the prison, to my great surprise his cellmate presented me with a letter my older brother had left before committing suicide.

He had written: "I've decided to kill myself because I can't stand all this, in fact I've been dead since the day I was sentenced to death for facts I don't know. For me, to live condemned to death is to live without hope. My parents, who supported me and in whom I had hope that they could help me through this ordeal, are all dead. As their only son, I had to at least attend their funeral, but I know they're dead because they've given up hope of ever seeing me again. I regret that I was the cause of the death of those who gave me life. For you my little one, I spare you the burden of always having to visit this twisted and traumatic place, you'll suffer as little as possible I assure you it's my only way of protecting you to God little sister".

Gary Hawkins (United States of America)

14-year-old son of Gary Graham/Shaka Sankofa. His story was shared by Sunny Jacobs Foundation.

I've been wanting to go to a Chicago Bulls game for a long time, because my friends, they go with their daddy's. And I think, I can't go, because I don't have a daddy. [...] When he went to prison, he didn't know how to read or write, none of that. **I want to be smart, but I don't want to go to death row to do it.** [...] They bring him out in handcuffs and put him in a cage, so every time I go, I got to see him behind the glass, and it made me feel ashamed. [...] If the wall wasn't there, I'd run to my father and give him a big hug. [...] When I go to school, I just want to be me, but instead of me, I'm Gary Graham's kid. They say, you are getting in trouble a lot, you'll be on death row too. Around the end of school, I used to get in a fight almost every day, so I just stopped going.

Tina Pafero (United States of America)

23-year-old daughter of Jesse Tafero. Her story was shared by Sunny Jacobs Foundation.

I knew my parents my whole life. I always went to prison to visit them. They were in separate prisons, miles and miles apart. I remember doing a double, and I went to see my mother and the next day we took the bus, me and my grandmother; it was a 6 or 7-hour drive. I remember I got a double ear infection. It was just so much stress and emotion and everything, that it just affected me. [...]

I was daddy's little girl, so when he came out, I immediately had to hold on to my seat so not to run over to him. It was like magic. My father was amazingly talented, an artist, a poet, and even besides his looks, he has this amazing aura. I wish I knew him when I was an older person, as I am now in my twenties, and I think about that. [...]

The last time I saw him was four or five days before his execution. I thought it could be our last visit. And there was no touching. At one point he said, God, you're so grown up, you have make-up on, you're my little girl, and I took my make-up off. He told me not to be afraid, and he told me he wasn't afraid. He looked worse than I've ever seen him. I mean, this was death in front of me. Then my grandmother, I don't know what she did or how she pulled it off, but the guards gave me a contact visit just for two minutes. And they said they were going to have to strip search me. And then I went back in and gave him a hug and I sat on his lap. And he told me to stay strong and always be strong, not to be afraid, and I did. [...]

I can't be angry with them anymore, but when you talk about it, there's a certain sense of anger that I feel. **There's nothing I can do about it. Of course, I can fight, that's why I'm on this journey. This is what I can do about it. But I can't bring my father back. They can't bring my father back. They can't take away what they've done.**

ACTIVIST AND POLITICAL VOICES

Modifying the Law for the Fight Against Illicit Drugs is a necessity, but the problem of drugs is not going to be resolved simply by-passing laws. **Right now, there is research that shows the root causes of addiction, and the results of this research must, therefore, be assessed and implemented.** Unfortunately, the lack of proper facilities for wholesome, healthy, and refreshing leisure activities and sports; lack of proper education; as well as weak and shaky religious and moral beliefs; are considered to be the causes of resorting to drugs in this abandoned society. Such a society will not, therefore, be reformed solely by preaching to it or through police action.

Jalil Rahimi (Iran)

Representative in the Islamic Consultative Assembly and member of the parliament's Judicial and Legal Commission Presiding Board on executions for drug offences. His story was shared by ABC.

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I'm Josué Wallay Akuzwe, an activist with the citizen movement *Congo notre avenir* [Congo our future], and I'd like to tell you about the risks we run as members of citizen movements in the DRC on the issue of the death penalty and security. In fact, as a citizen's movement, we organize public demonstrations to denounce the abuses or inaction of those in power on social life and on generalized insecurity in eastern DRC, who cause us to be confronted with arbitrary arrests.

Surprisingly, once arrested, we don't enjoy any of the rights of detained people. Sometimes, after several discussions and pressure tactics, you may be notified and a case file opened, and here again, during the trial, you often find yourself facing charges that may lead the judge to pronounce the death penalty. Often, the justice system labels us as rebels, criminal associations or insurrectionary movements. However, they often find it difficult to justify their judgments, and maintaining this penalty in the DRC is a permanent danger and does not foster a good climate for our activism in citizen movements.

The lifting of the moratorium on executions is unconstitutional and illustrates an authoritarian drift and a worrying step backwards in the system of national protection of human rights. **The death penalty is particularly dangerous in a country where the justice system is dysfunctional**, and it has been described as sick by the President of the Republic himself. The lack of independence and impartiality of the judicial system is notorious, and military justice does not provide for a double level of jurisdiction, in violation of the procedural guarantees inherent in a fair trial. Finally, **the death penalty is an instrument of terror for settling scores with opponents, civil society players and the poor who have no means of defending themselves.**

We advocate the pure and simple abolition of the death penalty and a profound reform of the justice system to consolidate a state of rights that protects fundamental freedoms and natural rights.

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**Josué Wallay Akuzwe
(Democratic Republic
of Congo)**

His story was shared by
CODHAS