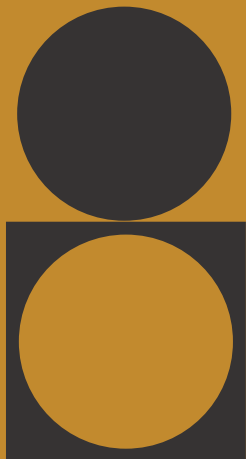


# THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES:

## GLOBAL OVERVIEW

2024





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**The Death Penalty for Drug Offences:  
Global Overview 2024**

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International, 2025  
ISBN: 978-1-915255-18-1

Designed by Crispdesign based on an  
original design by ESCOLA  
Published by Harm Reduction  
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**Harm Reduction International (HRI)** envisions a world in which drug policies uphold dignity, health and rights. We use data and advocacy to promote harm reduction and drug policy reform. We show how rights-based, evidence-informed responses to drugs contribute to healthier, safer societies, and why investing in harm reduction makes sense.

HRI is an NGO with Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

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This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Harm Reduction International and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union. This activity is part of the Global Consortium for Death Penalty Abolition, a civil society-led initiative aiming to amplify the voice and influence of the abolitionist movement on a global scale with the support of the European Union under a Financial Framework Partnership Agreement (FFPA).



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not be possible without data made available or shared by leading human rights organisations and individual experts and advocates, many of whom provided advice and assistance throughout the drafting process. We would specifically like to thank the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, the Afada Observatory, Ambika Satkunanathan, Amnesty International, the Coalition Against the Death Penalty (Philippines), Eleos Justice (Monash University), European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR), HAYAT, Justice Project Pakistan, LBH Masyarakat, ODHIKAR, Project 39A, Reprieve and Transformative Justice Collective.

Thanks are also owed to colleagues at Harm Reduction International for their feedback and support in preparing this report: Ailish Brennan, Anne Taiwo, Catherine Cook, Cinzia Brentari, Colleen Daniels, Gaj Gurung, Lucy O'Hare, Maddie O'Hare, Marcela Tovar, Martina Moreira, Nitika Kakkar, Paola Rodríguez, Paulina Cortez Licona, Shaun Shelly, Suchitra Rajagopalan and Ugochi Egwu.

Any errors are the sole responsibility of Harm Reduction International.

# INTRODUCTION

Harm Reduction International (HRI) has monitored the use of the death penalty for drug offences worldwide since our first groundbreaking publication on this issue in 2007. This report, our 14th on the subject, continues our work of providing regular updates on legislative, policy and practical developments related to the use of capital punishment for drug offences, a practice which is a clear violation of international human rights and drug control standards. The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024 presents an analysis of key developments, with a focus on analysing and disseminating available figures and trends on drug-related executions and death sentences. It consists of an overview of each category of countries including case studies where relevant, as well as supplementary analysis of international and national policy developments.

A dedicated section summarises the findings of HRI's report, *Gaining Ground: How states abolish or restrict application of the death penalty for drug offences*, which explores how 17 countries have either abolished or limited the use of the death penalty for drug offences. This section reviews reform processes, identifies key actors and factors – social, political, cultural and economic – that have catalysed change towards abolition, and provides recommendations which can be of use to advocates in a time of exceptional recourse to the death penalty as a tool of drug control.

HRI opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception.

# METHODOLOGY

Drug offences (also referred to as drug-related offences or drug-related crimes) are drug-related activities categorised as crimes under national laws. For the purposes of this report, this definition excludes activities that do not relate to the trafficking, possession or use of controlled substances and related inchoate offences (inciting, assisting or abetting a drug-related crime).

In the 34 countries that retain the death penalty for drug offences, capital punishment is typically applied for cultivating and manufacturing controlled substances and for smuggling, trafficking or importing/exporting controlled substances. However, in some of these countries, the following drug offences may also be punishable by the death penalty (among others): possession, storing and hiding drugs, financing drug offences, and inducing or coercing others into using drugs. For more information on the drug offences punishable by death by jurisdiction, visit: <https://hri.global/publications/deathpenaltydrugslegislation/>.

HRI's research on the death penalty for drug offences excludes countries where drug offences are punishable with death *only* if they involve, or result in, intentional killing. For example, in Saint Lucia (not included in this report), the only drug-related offence punishable by death is murder committed in connection with drug trafficking or other drug offences.<sup>1</sup>

The death penalty is reported as 'mandatory' when it is the only punishment that can be imposed following a conviction for at least certain categories of drug offences (without regarding the circumstances of the offence or the offender). Mandatory sentences hamper judicial sentencing discretion. By international human rights standards, this means mandatory sentences are inherently arbitrary.<sup>2</sup>

The numbers that have been included in this report are drawn from and crosschecked against official government reports (where available), state-run news agencies, court judgments, non-governmental organisations' (NGO) reports and databases, United Nations (UN) documents, media reports, scholarly articles, and communications with local activists and human rights advocates, organisations and groups. Unless specified, the source for all figures and information provided in this report is an internal HRI dataset on death sentences and executions for drug offences. Every effort has been taken to minimise inaccuracies, but there is always the potential for error. HRI welcomes information or additional data not included in this report.

1. Article 86(1)(d)(vi), Criminal Code of Saint Lucia (Act 9 of 2004 in force from 1 January 2005).  
2. UN Human Rights Committee, (3 September 2019), 'General Comment 36 on the Right to Life', UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/36, para 37, UN: New York; UN Commission on Human Rights, Civil and Political Rights, (22 December 2004), 'Including the Questions of Disappearances and Summary Executions: Report of the Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston', UN Doc. E/CN.4/2007/5, para. 63-4 and 80, UN: New York; UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, (22 July 2024), 'Annual report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention' UN Doc. A/HRC/57/44, para 43-51, UN: New York.

Identifying current drug laws and controlled drugs schedules in some countries can be challenging due to limited reporting and recording at the national level, in addition to language barriers. Some governments make their laws available on official websites; others do not. Where it was not possible for HRI to independently verify a specific law, the report relies on credible secondary sources.

With respect to data on death row populations,<sup>3</sup> death sentences and executions, the margin for error is even greater. In many countries, information about the use of the death penalty is shrouded in secrecy or opaque at best. For this reason, many of the figures cited in this report cannot be considered comprehensive and instead must be considered as the minimum number of confirmed sentences, executions or individuals on death row; real numbers are higher, in some cases significantly so. Where information is incomplete, an attempt has been made to identify the gaps. In some cases, information among sources is discordant due to this lack of transparency. In these cases, HRI has made a judgement based on available evidence.

When the symbol '+' is used next to a number, it means this is the minimum confirmed number, but credible reports suggest the actual figure is likely to be higher. Global and yearly figures are calculated by using the minimum confirmed figures.

3. We acknowledge that there is no consensus regarding the definition of death row and that different authorities and organisations may collect data differently. The information provided by HRI in this report may include figures collected by countries and organisations according to different criteria.

# CATEGORIES

To demonstrate the differences between law and practice among countries where the death penalty can be applied for drug offences, HRI categorises countries into the categories of 'high application', 'low application' or 'symbolic application'. As more information emerges or practice changes, countries are re-categorised.

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**High Application States** are those in which any executions for drug offences were carried out, or at least 10 drug-related death sentences were imposed, per year in the past five years.

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**Low Application States** are those where executions for drug offences have not been carried out in the past five years, but death sentences for drug offences have been imposed during this period, although the number of death sentences does not meet the 'high application' threshold.

Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait and Yemen are among 'low application' states because they have imposed the death penalty for drug offences in the past five years. Although they carried out executions in 2024 these were not for drug offences. The section below, therefore, only provides figures on death sentences and death row populations.

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**Symbolic Application States** are those that have the death penalty for drug offences within their legislation but have not carried out executions nor sentenced individuals to death for drug offences in the past five years.

Myanmar and the USA are among 'symbolic application' states because they have not imposed death sentences for drug offences in the past five years. Although they carried out executions in 2024 these were not for drug offences.

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A fourth category, **insufficient data**, denotes instances where there is not enough information to accurately classify the country.

# CONTENTS

Foreword .....	8
2024 in a snapshot .....	10
Global picture .....	12
The death penalty for drug offences in intergovernmental fora .....	17
The death penalty for drug offences in 2024 .....	21
● High application states .....	22
● Low application states .....	31
● Symbolic application states .....	38
● Insufficient data .....	40
Gaining Ground: How states abolish or restrict application of the death penalty for drug offences .....	41



# FOREWORD

**By Dr. Morris Tidball-Binz**

*UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*

People should never be sentenced to death, least executed, for drug offences. This practice is contrary to international law and standards as drug offences do not meet the definition of ‘most serious crimes’ to which international law requires the death penalty be limited to, in retentionist countries. Yet, HRI’s monitoring confirms that punitive drug policies continue to be a key driver of the imposition of capital punishment globally, with drug related executions representing roughly 40% of all known executions.

While more and more countries remove capital punishment from their legislation, countries that punish drug offences with death are doubling down on executions and continue to defend this practice. 2024 is so far the deadliest year in almost a decade, with over 600 people confirmed to be executed for drug offences. Hundreds more executions likely took place but remain unreported because of state secrecy and lack of transparency – which, in itself, is a grave violation of human rights standards. Meanwhile, thousands of people are suffering on death row in often substandard and inhumane conditions.

There is no strong evidence that the death penalty is effective in curtailing illicit drug production, trade and use, nor that it makes society safer. Rather, as I already observed in my role as a UN Special Rapporteur, it causes extreme suffering, often equivalent to torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, to the convicted person but also to their family, all the way from the sentencing up until the execution. This is often compounded by poor prison conditions, incommunicado detention, solitary confinement, social exclusion and lengthy pending executions. These factors, including those which characterise the death row phenomenon, are in breach of the absolute prohibition of torture and ill treatment.

In addition, the death penalty also reinforces cycles of violence and abuse. As it has been consistently evidenced by HRI’s monitoring work, it disproportionately impacts vulnerable populations, including women, foreign nationals and members of ethnic minorities; and perpetuates structural violence and discrimination.

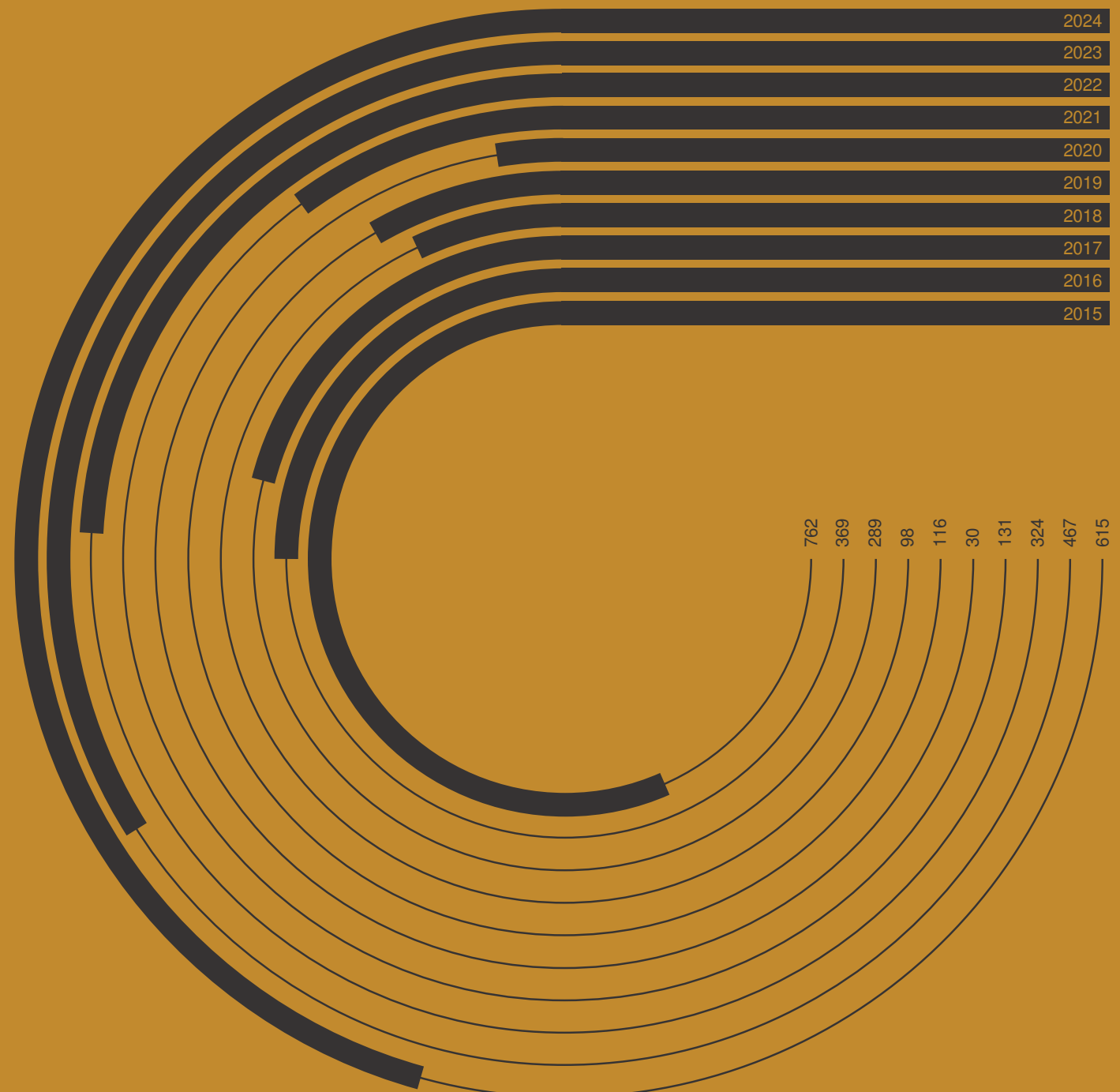
The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024 confirms that critical changes in drug policy are necessary to achieve global abolition of the death penalty. As I highlighted on a joint [statement](#) with other UN experts, a “paradigm shift” away from punitive approaches and towards drug policies centred around health and fundamental human rights for all is needed.

The time for action is now. The international community must resolutely uphold its commitment to ending the use of the death penalty, including for drug offences. To achieving which drug policy reforms that fully align with human rights obligations are urgently necessary. The use of the death penalty for drug offences must be unequivocally condemned, together with demands for accountability and transparency. It is equally important to facilitate exchange of good practices to foster collective learning on the journey towards global abolition. By joining forces and stepping up efforts against the death penalty we will protect the right to life of all human beings and achieve the ultimate goal of its total abolition, for all crimes.

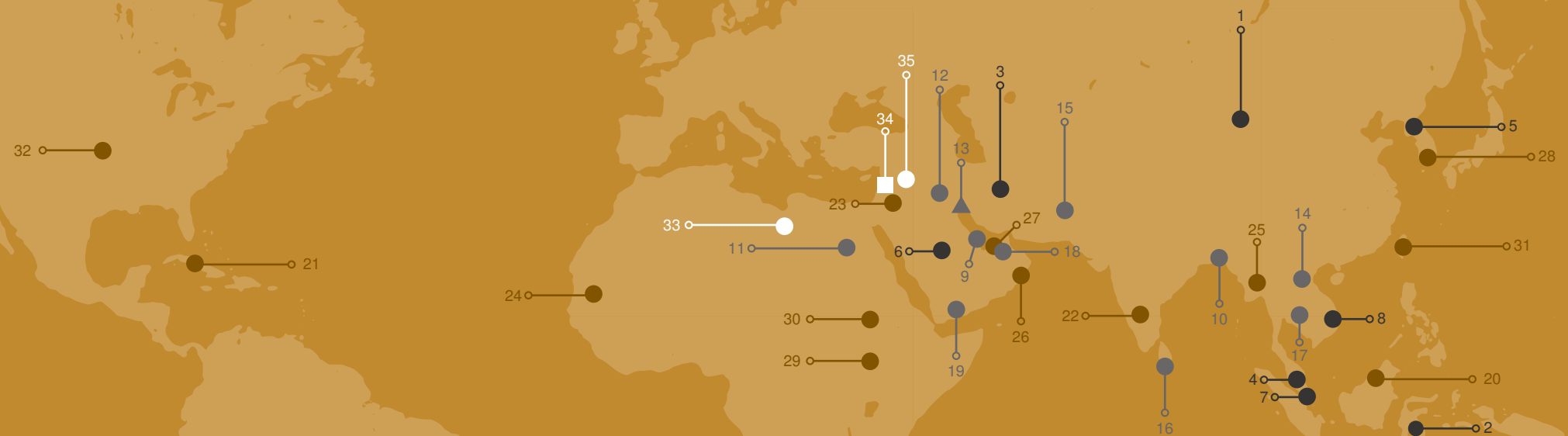
# 2024 IN A SNAPSHOT

## MINIMUM CONFIRMED EXECUTIONS FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2015-2024)

- By the end of 2024, **34 countries retained the death penalty for a range of drug offences** worldwide.
- **Drug-related executions were confirmed in four countries** (China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Singapore). Executions are assumed to have been carried out in North Korea and Vietnam, on which information is lacking due to state secrecy and censorship.
- **At least 615 people were executed for drug offences** worldwide (excluding figures from China, Vietnam and North Korea). This represents a 32% increase from 2023 and a staggering 1950% increase from 2020 – the year with the lowest figure on record.
- **Drug offences were responsible for roughly 40% of all executions confirmed globally** – almost one in two.
- **Iran executed 485 people for drug offences**, equating to 79% of known drug-related executions globally. Of these, at least 14 were women – the highest number of women executed in Iran in a decade.
- A 6000% surge from 2023 in known drug-related executions took place in Saudi Arabia, where **122 people were executed for drug offences** – the highest figure ever recorded in the Kingdom.
- **377 death sentences for drug offences** were confirmed in 17 countries.
- **At least 2,300 people are on death row for drug offences** in 19 countries.
- Confirmed figures are a massive underestimate of the phenomenon due to **a persistent lack of transparency, and censorship on information about the use of the death penalty.**



# COUNTRY BY COUNTRY



## High Application

1. China
2. Indonesia
3. Iran
4. Malaysia
5. North Korea (DPRK)
6. Saudi Arabia
7. Singapore
8. Vietnam

## Low Application

9. Bahrain
10. Bangladesh
11. Egypt
12. Iraq
13. Kuwait
14. Lao PDR
15. Pakistan\*
16. Sri Lanka
17. Thailand
18. United Arab Emirates
19. Yemen

## Symbolic Application

20. Brunei Darussalam
21. Cuba
22. India
23. Jordan
24. Mauritania
25. Myanmar
26. Oman
27. Qatar
28. South Korea
29. South Sudan
30. Sudan
31. Taiwan
32. United States of America

## Insufficient Data

33. Libya
34. State of Palestine (Gaza)
35. Syria

Moved from Symbolic Application to Insufficient Data 

Moved from High Application to Low Application 

\*Pakistan removed death as a possible sentence for drug offences in 2023. As death sentences and people on death row for drug offences were reported in 2024, the decision was made to continue reporting on it.

# GLOBAL PICTURE

After cautious optimism between 2018 and 2020, HRI has been reporting a steady increase in known drug-related executions since 2021. **This trend reached crisis levels in 2024.** With 615 people confirmed to have been executed for drug offences, 2024 is the deadliest year on record since 2015. Known executions have risen by 32% from 2023, and by a staggering 1950% from 2020, the year with the lowest figure on record. Notably, the figure of 615 known executions does not include the hundreds – if not thousands – of drug-related executions carried out in China, North Korea and Vietnam, where state censorship prevents us from realistically documenting how many people have been killed for drug offences.

Executions were confirmed or assumed to have taken place in **six countries**: China, Iran, North Korea, Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam. Iran is responsible for 79% of all known drug-related executions (485) and thus remains the world's biggest executioner for drug offences, together with China. The highest increase in executions was recorded in Saudi Arabia, where 122 people were executed for drug offences. This is a 6000% surge from 2023 (when two people were executed for drug offences), and the highest figure ever recorded in the Kingdom, signalling a renewed commitment to this barbaric practice as a tool of drug control. A jump in executions also occurred in Singapore, where eight people were hanged for drug trafficking between August and November 2024 alone.

This is an extremely small group of countries, responsible for an incommensurate number of executions. This signals an alarming determination to retain this inhumane punishment, despite its ineffectiveness and incompatibility with international law and standards.

These figures also confirm that **drug control has become a key driver of the imposition of capital punishment worldwide and an obstacle to global abolition of the death penalty.** Around 40% of all known executions carried out in 2024 – almost one in two – were for drug offences. The same trend is mirrored at the domestic level: drug offences were responsible for the majority of known executions in Iran (52%) and Singapore (89%), and for the majority of death sentences confirmed in Indonesia, Iraq, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. Available figures on death row populations paint a similar picture.

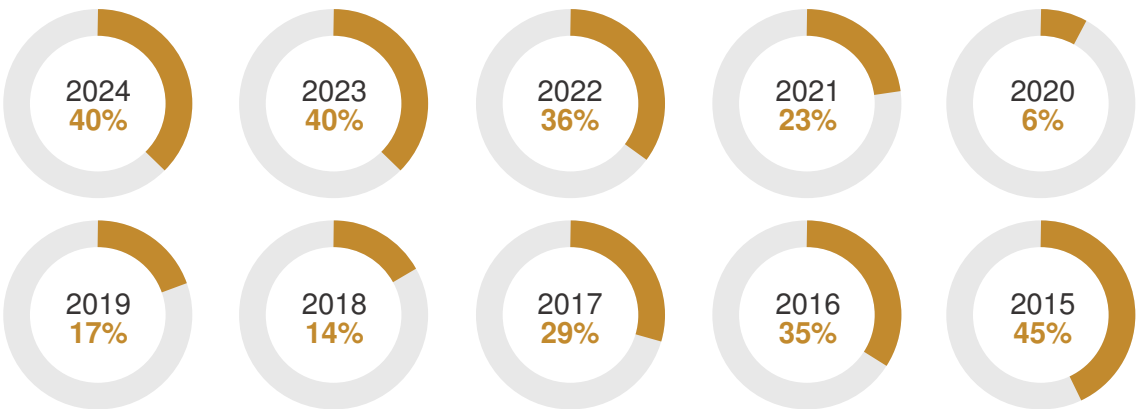
Among those executed, at least 18 were **women** and 136 – more than one in five – were **foreign nationals**. The finding on foreign nationals is a stark reminder of the overrepresentation of this group among people sentenced to death and executed

for drug offences, driven both by marginalisation and the unique barriers of navigating foreign criminal legal systems.

**At least 377 people were sentenced to death for drug offences in 17 countries**, of which 11 were women and 20 foreign nationals. These figures are likely to be only the tip of the iceberg due to the widespread lack of updated and disaggregated information (particularly on 'high application' countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia) and in light of state practices concerning executions. While a slight decrease in death sentences for drug offences was observed in countries such as Malaysia (thanks to the 2023 reform which removed the mandatory nature of capital punishment, giving judges full discretion in drug trafficking cases), Indonesia and Vietnam (possibly due to gaps in monitoring), the situation has deteriorated in others. This has been most notable in Iraq where officials claimed over 140 death sentences were imposed for drug offences in 2024 due to large-scale anti-drug operations. If confirmed, this would be a 658% jump in drug-related death sentences from 2023. Worryingly, a record number of people were executed in Iraq in 2024, mostly for terrorism. These executions often took place en masse, following trials tainted by torture and due process violations. These developments combined suggest drug-related executions may start happening in the country soon.

In Pakistan, death was completely removed as a possible sentence for drug offences in 2023. However, Justice Project Pakistan reported three death sentences for drug-related offences in 2024. This is a unique situation, and it highlights the urgency of judicial sensitisation and reform rollout throughout the country.

## PERCENTAGE OF KNOWN GLOBAL EXECUTIONS FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2015-2024)



These figures are of extreme concern to the thousands of people who remain on death row for drug offences in at least 19 countries, many of whom are considered to be at imminent risk of execution.

Executions and death sentences have not taken place without **resistance**. Protests and criticism by civil society, people on death row and experts were recorded in many retentionist countries and beyond, with those involved sometimes at great personal risk. In Singapore, peaceful activism and monitoring have been met with what many – including HRI – denounce as harassment and intimidation. In Iran, people on death row have defied the regime and launched the No Executions Tuesdays campaign, going on hunger strike once every week since January 2024 to attract attention to their desperate situation.

Regrettably, grassroots activism has not been supported at the institutional level. In 2024, **the international community failed, once again, to hold retentionist countries accountable** for such blatant violations of human rights and drug control law and standards. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN human rights experts harshly condemned executions in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Singapore and called for moratoria as did the European Union, Norway, Switzerland and even the USA. However, no practical consequences ensued. Worryingly, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and many countries remained silent, despite the dramatic pace of executions, and actively cooperated in antitrafficking operations with countries that engage in this illegal practice. Far from being sanctioned for its actions, Saudi Arabia was awarded with hosting the 2034 World Cup, in a move that human rights activists vocally condemned.

The reforms that took place in 2023 in Pakistan and Malaysia had raised hopes that change is possible when spaces for dialogue open and governments can move beyond ideology. But the record-high number of executions confirmed in 2024 are a cry for help and act as a testament to the international community's failure to take swift and concerted action against this abusive practice.

Ending the death penalty cannot be achieved without substantial drug policy reform at the national level and a critical assessment of bilateral and international anti-narcotics cooperation. There is an urgent need to interrogate the role of a multilateral ecosystem which should be at the forefront of this fight, but too often remains silent and therefore complicit. The determination of retentionist countries signals that, while change must be guided by local actors, it cannot only come from within. It requires a strong, sustained and coordinated response, and it cannot be delayed further.

# ATTEMPTS TO INTRODUCE THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES

Throughout 2024, debates ensued in several countries around introducing, or reintroducing, the death penalty for drug offences. None of these led to actual amendments.

In May, **Nigeria's** Senate hastily adopted a draft bill amending the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) Act which, among other things, increases the maximum punishment for drug offences from life imprisonment to death.<sup>4</sup> The bill, which moved to the House of Representatives for further debate, was opposed by many, including lawmakers,<sup>5</sup> the UNODC country representative,<sup>6</sup> and activists and lawyers.<sup>7</sup> As of March 2025 the bill has not been adopted.

Later in May, a parliamentary debate was hosted in **Tonga** on extending capital punishment to drug crimes.<sup>8</sup> The death penalty remains in place in the country but has not been imposed in over 40 years. The proposal received harsh criticism,<sup>9</sup> and it was rejected 38 to 8,<sup>10</sup> but it is concerning that this was the second time this measure had been suggested in four years.

4. Abdulqudus Ogundapo, (9 May 2024), 'Senate passes bill prescribing death sentence for drug traffickers', Premium Times, Abuja [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/692730-senate-passes-bill-prescribing-death-sentence-for-drug-traffickers.html](http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/692730-senate-passes-bill-prescribing-death-sentence-for-drug-traffickers.html); Dirisu Yakubu, (9 May 2024), 'Senate approves death penalty for drug offenders', Punch, Lagos [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://punchng.com/senate-approves-death-penalty-for-drug-offenders>.
5. Camillus Eboh, (9 May 2024), 'Nigeria's Senate proposes death penalty for drug trafficking', Reuters, Abuja [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-senate-proposes-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-2024-05-09](http://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerias-senate-proposes-death-penalty-drug-trafficking-2024-05-09).
6. Abiodun Sanusi, (21 May 2024), 'UN urges Reps to reject death penalty bill for drug offences', Punch, Lagos [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://punchng.com/un-urges-reps-to-reject-death-penalty-bill-for-drug-offences>.
7. Drug Harm Reduction Advocacy Network, (14 July 2024), 'Death penalty bill: DHRAN pushes for reform in Nigeria's drug laws at National dialogue', DHRAN, Abuja [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://dhran.ng/death-penalty-bill-dhran-pushes-reform-nigerias-drug-laws-national-dialogue>; Timothy Obiezu, (15 May 2024), 'Nigerian lawmakers, activists divided over drug abuse penalties', VOA News, Abuja [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.voanews.com/a/nigerian-lawmakers-activists-divided-over-drug-abuse-penalties/7613084.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/nigerian-lawmakers-activists-divided-over-drug-abuse-penalties/7613084.html).
8. Agnes Tupou, (27 May 2024), 'Tonga considers extending death penalty to drug crimes', ABC Pacific Beat, Australia [online article and broadcast, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/tonga-death-penalty/103900504](http://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/tonga-death-penalty/103900504).
9. Anti-Death Penalty Aisa Network et al., (11 June 2024), 'Tonga: Government must not extend the death penalty to drug-related offences', HRI, London. Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Tonga-Final-Joint-Statement-11.06.2024.pdf>.
10. RNZ, (31 May 2024), 'Tonga legislators reject death penalty proposal', RNZ, Wellington [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/518323/tonga-legislators-reject-death-penalty-proposal](http://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/518323/tonga-legislators-reject-death-penalty-proposal).



In August, **Fiji**'s Minister for Women and Children advocated reintroducing the death penalty specifically to deter drug trafficking.<sup>11</sup> The proposal was opposed by ministers and members of parliament, who clarified that doing so would be against the country's constitution.<sup>12</sup>

In the same month, the government of the **Maldives** reportedly submitted to its parliament a draft bill to amend the country's Drugs Act to expand the death penalty – currently reserved for murder – to drug trafficking offences.<sup>13</sup> This move is particularly concerning considering statements by government representatives claiming that plans are underway to resume executions after a 70-year hiatus.<sup>14</sup>

In the **Philippines**, the Coalition Against the Death Penalty reports that, as of 30 November 2024, eight bills were pending discussion in Congress (three in the Senate and five in the House) which propose reintroducing the death penalty for drug trafficking.<sup>15</sup> In exchanges with the European Union (EU), the government 'reiterated their mutual and continuing compliance to the 2nd Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on prohibiting the death penalty',<sup>16</sup> signalling that such bills would not be adopted.

11. RNZ, (22 August 2024), 'Fiji minister wants to 'explore the possibility of death penalty' to tackle drug crisis', RNZ, Wellington [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/525809/fiji-minister-wants-to-explore-the-possibility-of-death-penalty-to-tackle-drug-crisis](http://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/525809/fiji-minister-wants-to-explore-the-possibility-of-death-penalty-to-tackle-drug-crisis).
12. RNZ, (23 August 2024), 'Return of death penalty not solution to Fiji's fight against drugs, human rights chair and home affairs minister say', RNZ, Wellington [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/525983/return-of-death-penalty-not-solution-to-fiji-s-fight-against-drugs-human-rights-chair-and-home-affairs-minister-say](http://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/525983/return-of-death-penalty-not-solution-to-fiji-s-fight-against-drugs-human-rights-chair-and-home-affairs-minister-say). 13. Atoll Times, (17 August 2024), 'Maldives proposes death penalty for drug trafficking', Atoll Times, Male', Maldives [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://atolltimes.mv/post/news/9549>.
14. Mohamed Rehan, (22 October 2024), 'Maldives readies introducing death penalty: Home Minister', SUN, Male', Maldives [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://en.sun.mv/92733>; Human Rights Watch, (21 December 2023), 'Maldives: Reverse Plans to Reinstate Death Penalty', HRW, Bangkok [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/21/maldives-reverse-plans-reinstate-death-penalty](http://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/21/maldives-reverse-plans-reinstate-death-penalty).
15. E-mail communication with Coalition Against the Death Penalty, 30 November 2024.
16. European External Action Service, (30 October 2024), 'Eu-Philippines': Joint Press Release on the Fourth Subcommittee Meeting on Good Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights', EEAS, Manila [online media release, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-philippines-joint-press-release-fourth-subcommittee-meeting-good-governance-rule-law-and-human\\_en](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-philippines-joint-press-release-fourth-subcommittee-meeting-good-governance-rule-law-and-human_en).

# THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES IN

## INTERGOVERNMENTAL FORA

The death penalty for drug offences was addressed in several intergovernmental fora in 2024.

**The High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk**, made significant statements opposing the increase in use of the death penalty for drug offences in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Singapore. He emphasised its ineffectiveness, called for drug policy reform, and urged states to implement an official moratorium on the death penalty as a critical step towards universal abolition.<sup>17</sup>

At the High-Level Segment of the **67th session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)**, Türk – the first High Commissioner to ever attend a CND sessions – stated that “criminalisation, including the use of the death penalty, has neither diminished drug use nor deterred drug-related crime”, highlighting that punitive approaches to drug use have led to “lives ruined, not just by the use of drugs in itself, but also, by the fallout of counterproductive policies”.<sup>18</sup> The CND session was a critical moment for evaluating progress and setting new directions in implementing new international drug policy commitments. Nevertheless, no Resolution was adopted to address the use of the death penalty for drug offences. Still, during the plenary session and general debates, some UN member states reiterated their stance against the death penalty for drug offences, including Australia, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and Uruguay, as well as the EU.

17. Among others, see Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, (9 August 2024), ‘Iran: Alarmingly high number of executions in short period of time’, OHCHR, Geneva [online media statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/08/iran-alarmingly-high-number-executions-short-period-time](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2024/08/iran-alarmingly-high-number-executions-short-period-time); OHCHR, (9 September 2024), ‘Human Rights are our mainstay against unbridled power’, OHCHR, Geneva [online media statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/09/human-rights-are-our-mainstay-against-unbridled-power](http://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/09/human-rights-are-our-mainstay-against-unbridled-power).
18. OHCHR, (14 March 2024), ‘Türk urges transformative change in global drug policy’, OHCHR, Geneva [online media statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/03/turk-urges-transformative-change-global-drug-policy](http://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/03/turk-urges-transformative-change-global-drug-policy).

At the **Human Rights Council**, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Iran<sup>19</sup> and the UN Secretary-General<sup>20</sup> expressed their concern about the alarming increase in executions in Iran, and the disproportionate imposition of capital punishment against ethnic and religious minorities, especially for drug- and security-related offences. In its annual report, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention reiterated that the death penalty for drug offences is incompatible with international standards on the use of the death penalty. It stated that sentencing of drug offences should never be mandatory; rather it should be proportionate and tailored to the offender's circumstances, including their role in the drug trade and whether they are a victim of human trafficking or were subjected to coercion.

Another noteworthy development was the adoption on 19 December 2024 of a new **UN General Assembly Resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty**,<sup>21</sup> which gained historic support. Out of the 193 UN member states, 130 voted in favour of the resolution (5 more than the last resolution in 2022), 32 voted against (5 less than in 2022), 22 abstained and 9 were absent during the deliberation process.<sup>22</sup> Despite the record-high support for this resolution, reflecting a strengthened international commitment to abolishing the death penalty, countries that retain capital punishment for drug offences have yet to express their endorsement of the resolution: only five voted in favour – one more than in 2022.

Myanmar has reaffirmed its commitment to abolishing the death penalty by voting in favour of the UN Resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty for the second consecutive time. Bangladesh abstained for the first time after historically voting against the moratorium, signalling a potential shift in its stance, while Jordan supported the resolution after two consecutive instances of voting against it. Mauritania, in turn, reversed its position by voting against the moratorium after abstaining on the last three resolutions on the topic.

19. Human Rights Council, (9 February 2024), 'Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran', UN Doc. A/HRC/55/62, UNHRC, Geneva.
20. Human Rights Council, (19 June 2024), 'Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Secretary General', UN Doc. A/HRC/56/22, UNHRC, Geneva; Human Rights Council, (16 July 2024), 'Question of the death penalty: Report of the Secretary-General', UN Doc. A/HRC/57/26, UNHRC, Geneva.
21. UN General Assembly, (19 December 2024), 'Moratorium on the use of the death penalty. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2024', UN Doc. A/RES/79/179, UNGA: New York).
22. World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, (20 December 2024), 'Two thirds of the United Nations General assembly vote in favor of the 10th resolution for a moratorium on the death penalty', WCADP, Montreuil, France [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://worldcoalition.org/2024/12/20/two-thirds-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-vote-in-favor-of-the-10th-resolution-for-a-moratorium-on-the-death-penalty>.

## UNGA resolutions on moratorium of the death penalty: voting record of countries that retain the death penalty for drug offences.

✓ In favour   ✗ Against   ▲ Abstention   ○ Do not vote

	2018	2020	2022	2024
Bahrain	✗	✗	✗	✗
Bangladesh	✗	✗	✗	▲
Brunei Darussalam	✗	✗	✗	✗
China	✗	✗	✗	✗
Cuba	▲	▲	▲	▲
Egypt	✗	✗	✗	✗
India	✗	✗	✗	✗
Indonesia	▲	▲	▲	▲
Iran	✗	✗	✗	✗
Iraq	✗	✗	✗	✗
Jordan	▲	✗	✗	✓
Kuwait	✗	✗	✗	✗
Lao PDR	▲	▲	▲	▲
Libya	✓	✗	✗	✗
Malaysia	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mauritania	▲	▲	▲	✗
Myanmar	▲	▲	✓	✓
North Korea	✗	✗	✗	✗
Oman	✗	✗	✗	✗
Pakistan	✓	✗	✗	✗
Palestine	○	○	○	○
Qatar	✗	✗	✗	✗
Saudi Arabia	✗	✗	✗	✗
Singapore	✗	✗	✗	✗
South Korea	▲	✓	✓	✓
South Sudan	▲	▲	▲	○
Sri Lanka	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sudan	✗	✗	✗	✗
Syria	✗	✗	✗	○
Taiwan	○	○	○	○
Thailand	▲	▲	▲	▲
United Arab Emirates	▲	▲	▲	▲
USA	✗	✗	✗	✗
Vietnam	▲	▲	▲	▲
Yemen	✗	▲	✗	✗

In contrast to the increasing international commitment towards abolition and the strong condemnation of the death penalty for drug offences by the Human Rights Council and UN human rights bodies and mechanisms, the **UNODC** – the UN agency with a specific mandate on drug-related matters – grievously failed to take a public stance on the issue. The only exception was the UNODC Representative in Nigeria’s public condemnation of the attempt to reintroduce the death penalty for drug offences in the country.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the UNODC has met the alarming surge in executions worldwide with silence and continues to cooperate with executing countries. This inaction represents a missed opportunity to hold UN member states accountable for their violations of international human rights and drug control standards.

## RENEWED COMMITMENTS TOWARDS DEATH PENALTY ABOLITION

Statements in intergovernmental fora reflect commitments by multilateral institutions and countries towards abolishing the death penalty, some of which were renewed or reiterated in 2024. In July 2024, the Global Consortium for Death Penalty Abolition was launched, funded by the EU. This six-year initiative reaffirms the EU’s focus on abolition by bringing together 25 organisations, including international, regional and local organisations and networks.<sup>24</sup>

**Switzerland** launched its Foreign Policy Strategy 2024-2027, which includes universal abolition of the death penalty as one of four thematic focus areas. The strategy seeks to reduce the number of countries that retain the death penalty by mobilising diplomacy, strengthening the international framework aimed at suspending or restricting the application of the death penalty and strengthening international collaboration.<sup>25</sup> After a dedicated inquiry, **Australia**’s Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade published a report on efforts to advocate for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty. The report recommends the Australian government, among other things, develop ‘strategies to advocate for: the abolition of the death penalty for drug-related crimes (...) and the abolition of the mandatory death penalty for all crimes’.<sup>26</sup>

23. Abiodun Sanusi, (21 May 2024), ‘UN urges Reps to reject death penalty bill for drug offences’, Punch, Lagos [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://punchng.com/un-urges-reps-to-reject-death-penalty-bill-for-drug-offences>.

24. HRI, (12 July 2024), ‘Launch of the Global Consortium for Death Penalty Abolition’, HRI, London [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://hri.global/news/launch-of-the-global-consortium-for-death-penalty-abolition>.

25. Government of Switzerland, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, (2024), Foreign Policy Strategy 2024-2027, FDFA, Bern. Available from [www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/implementing-foreign-policy/aussenpolitischestrategie.html](http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/implementing-foreign-policy/aussenpolitischestrategie.html).

26. Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, (2024), Inquiry into Australia’s efforts to advocate for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty, APH, Canberra. Available from [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/DeathPenalty/Inquiry\\_into\\_Australias\\_efforts\\_to\\_advocate\\_for\\_the\\_worldwide\\_abolition\\_of\\_the\\_death\\_penalty](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/DeathPenalty/Inquiry_into_Australias_efforts_to_advocate_for_the_worldwide_abolition_of_the_death_penalty).

# THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES IN 2024

This section summarises how laws are enforced, applied or revised in countries that have capital drug laws, using the categorisation of ‘high application’, ‘low application’, ‘symbolic application’ and ‘insufficient data’. The information presented here builds upon and updates the data presented in previous editions of this report.<sup>27</sup>

# HIGH APPLICATION STATES

Country	Executions for drug offences (% of total)		Death sentences for drug offences (% of total)		People on death row for drug offences (% of total)	
	2024	2023	2024	2023	2024	2023
China	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Indonesia	0 (-)	0 (-)	73+ (86%)	114+ (94%)	360 (63%)	249 (52%)
Iran	485+ (52%)	459+ (55%)	Unknown	Unknown	1000+ (unknown)	1000+ (unknown)
Malaysia	0 (-)	0 (-)	10+ (55%)	20+ (55%)	Unknown	700+ (55%)
North Korea (DPRK)	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Saudi Arabia	122 (35%)	2+ (1%)	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Singapore	8 (89%)	5 (100%)	5+ (100%)	9+ (100%)	48 (96%)	53 (95%)
Vietnam	Unknown	Unknown	113+ (73%)	188+ (81%)	Unknown	Unknown

The upward trend concerning **drug-related executions**, which began in 2021, accelerated in 2024, reaching the minimum confirmed number of 615. This represents a 32% increase from 2023, and the highest figure in almost a decade. Worryingly, hundreds of executions likely carried out in China, Vietnam and North Korea cannot be counted due to state censorship which prevents an accurate depiction of the situation.

Drug-related executions were confirmed in **four countries**: China, Iran, Singapore and Saudi Arabia. In addition, drug-related executions are assumed to have taken place in Vietnam and North Korea, as both countries are known to regularly carry out executions, with drug offences being among the main categories of crimes for which people are sentenced to death. For example, a defector from **North Korea** recently stated: “There have been so many cases of executions in North Korea due to drug-related incidents and the issue of South Korean dramas. It has become quite common.”<sup>28</sup>

The countries driving the spike in known drug-related executions are Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In **Iran**, monitoring by HRI, as well as the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, confirmed 485 executions for drug offences. While this is just a slight increase from 2023 (+6%), it reaffirms Iran as the biggest executioner for drug offences globally, together with China. Significantly, over half of all executions carried out in Iran (52%) were for drug offences. Of those executed for drug offences, at least 14 were women (the highest number of women executed in Iran in a decade). Among them was Marjan Hajizadeh, who was reportedly only 16 years old and a victim of forced marriage when she was arrested with her husband for carrying drugs.<sup>29</sup> Also executed for drug offences were 133 people identified as belonging to ethnic minority groups and 43 Afghan nationals. Experts explain this development by pointing to the ‘absence of a legitimate and accountable government in Afghanistan’, which they argue Iran is taking advantage of to intensify retribution against Afghan citizens who account for around 95% of all foreign nationals in prison in the Islamic Republic.<sup>30</sup>

Reports on the cases of those executed paint a picture of recurring abuses. Most executions were not officially reported, and families were oftentimes given no advance notice of the execution or were denied a final visit to their loved ones. Some of those executed had been imprisoned for over a decade. In at least one case, a person was reportedly executed after having his death sentence overturned, while waiting for the head of the judiciary to ratify the commutation. In other cases, people on death row were denied essential healthcare and had to withstand unnecessary pain and suffering while

28. The Korea Times, (27 June 2024), ‘N. Korea ramps up public executions of people distributing S. Korean movies: unification ministry’, The Korea Times, Seoul [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/103\\_377602.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2025/01/103_377602.html).

29. Iran Human Rights, (15 April 2024), ‘Child Bride Marjan Hajizadeh and Esmail Hassaniyani Executed for Drug Charges – UPDATED’, IHRNGO, Oslo [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6640>.

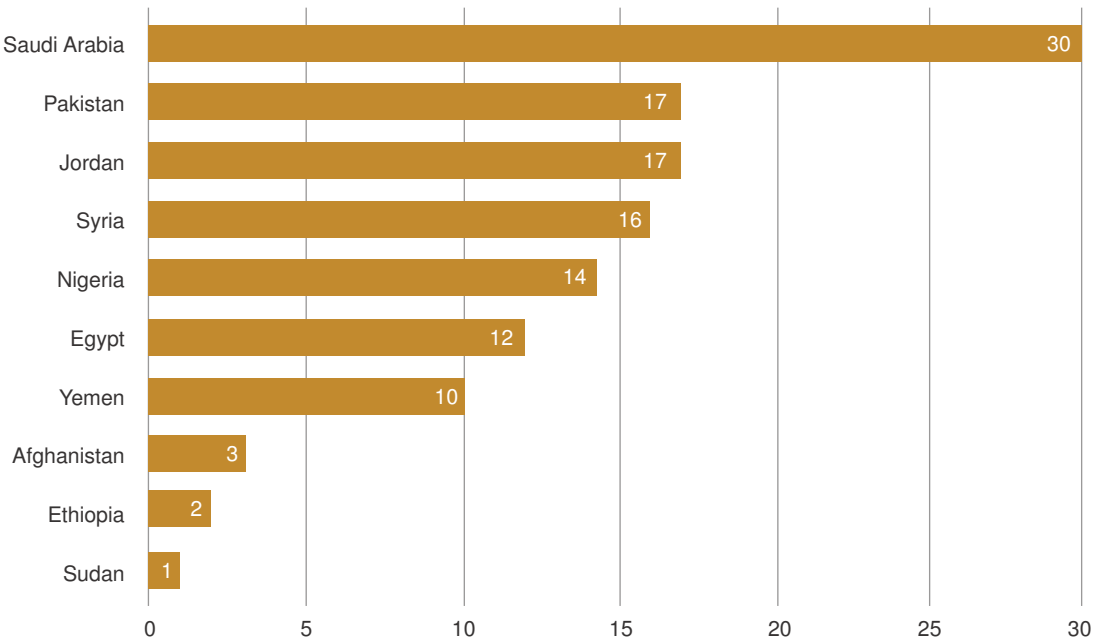
30. Yasin Shayan, (30 December 2024), ‘Iran executes over 70 Afghan nationals in 2024, rights group reports’, AMU, Tehran [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://amu.tv/147345>.



awaiting execution: one woman in prison was denied cancer treatment, another person ended up in a wheelchair after being denied medical attention in prison. Drug-related executions in Iran left at least 54 children without a parent.

A marked intensification in executions occurred in **Saudi Arabia**, where 122 people were executed for drug offences between May and December 2024, according to the European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR). This is a dramatic 6000% increase from 2023, and quashes hopes that Prince bin Salman will abide by his 2022 promise to limit capital punishment to homicide offences.<sup>31</sup> In the year with the highest number of executions ever recorded in the Kingdom, one third of all executions were for drug offences, in what has been described as a ‘purge’ of people in prison on these charges.<sup>32</sup> The overwhelming majority of people executed for drugs in Saudi Arabia (75%) were foreign nationals and four were women (all of the executed women were from Nigeria).

## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF PEOPLE EXECUTED IN SAUDI ARABIA (2024)



31. For more details see: Ajeng Larasati and Giada Girelli, (2021), *The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2020*, Harm Reduction International, London. Available from <https://hri.global/flagship-research/death-penalty/the-death-penalty-for-drug-offencesglobal-overview-2020>.

32. European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, (2025), *Blood Era: A Historic Record of Executions in Saudi Arabia 2024*, ESOHR, Berlin. Available from [https://euh.global.ssl.fastly.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Blood\\_Era\\_A\\_Historic\\_Record\\_of\\_Executions\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia\\_2024.pdf](https://euh.global.ssl.fastly.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Blood_Era_A_Historic_Record_of_Executions_in_Saudi_Arabia_2024.pdf).

Notably, ESOHR has recorded the execution of 15 people for offences related to cannabis alone, a substance which is now legal in over 30 countries.<sup>33</sup> This reportedly represents a departure from previous practice, suggesting a possible expansion in the use of the death penalty for drug offences in the country.<sup>34</sup>

An increase in drug-related executions was also reported in **Singapore**. Between August and November 2024 eight people were executed, compared with five executions in 2023. Among those executed in 2024 was a Malaysian citizen and a person with dual Singaporean-Iranian nationality. At least three people had reported a history of drug use and had claimed to possess the drugs for personal use. In one case, the UN pointed to “a record of psychosocial disabilities” which had not been accommodated for during the trial.<sup>35</sup> Several of those who were executed and received execution warrants throughout 2024 had legal proceedings pending, including a civil suit on the right to legal aid at the post-appeal stage.<sup>36</sup>

Executions continue taking place amid protests by civil society, which are often met with reprisals or intimidation. In **Iran**, people in prison started protesting executions in a movement known as the No Execution Tuesdays campaign. The protest, which started in January 2024 and quickly spread to over 30 prisons throughout the country, saw people on death row going on hunger strike once a week on the day before most transfers to pre-execution solitary confinement happen.<sup>37</sup> These protests were supported and amplified beyond prison walls by families of people on death row<sup>38</sup> plus activists and experts at national and international level who called on the UNODC to make its cooperation with Iran contingent on ending drug-related executions.<sup>39</sup> But, as of March 2025, the UNODC has not publicly indicated its intention to review this partnership.

In **Singapore**, civil society actors advocating for death penalty abolition report being under increased pressure, leading to a climate of perceived intimidation.<sup>40</sup> In a parliamentary speech in May 2024, the Minister of Home Affairs publicly condemned pro-abolition advocates as “a small group of people who attempt to mislead the public

33. AFP, (26 October 2022), 'These Are The Countries Where Cannabis Is Legal', NDTV, New Delhi [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ndtv.com/world-news/these-are-the-countries-where-cannabis-is-legal-3464318](http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/these-are-the-countries-where-cannabis-is-legal-3464318).
34. European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (2025), Blood Era: A Historic Record of Executions in Saudi Arabia 2024, ESOHR, Berlin.
35. OHCHR, (20 November 2024), 'Singapore must urgently halt execution of drug offender: UN experts', OHCHR, Geneva [online media release, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/singapore-must-urgently-halt-execution-drug-offender-un-experts](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/singapore-must-urgently-halt-execution-drug-offender-un-experts).
36. See, among others, Union of Catholic Asian News, (24 May 2024), 'Singapore urged to halt executions, abolish death penalty', UCA, Hong Kong [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ucanews.com/news/singapore-urged-to-halt-executions-abolish-death-penalty/105197](http://www.ucanews.com/news/singapore-urged-to-halt-executions-abolish-death-penalty/105197); Amnesty International et al., (31 October 2024), 'Joint statement – Singapore: Authorities must end human rights crackdown and unlawful drug related executions', HRI, London. Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Singapore-joint-statement-31-October-2024-FINAL.pdf>; Amnesty International, (4 October 2024), 'Singapore: Unlawful execution despite ongoing legal appeals raises fears of more to come', Amnesty International, Bangkok/London [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/singapore-unlawful-execution-despite-ongoing-legal-appeal-raises-fears-of-more-to-come](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/singapore-unlawful-execution-despite-ongoing-legal-appeal-raises-fears-of-more-to-come).
37. Iran Wire, (16 July 2024), 'Iran's Anti-Execution Campaign Expands to 11 Prisons on 25th Week', Iran Wire, London [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://iranwire.com/en/prisoners/131841-irans-anti-execution-campaign-expands-to-11-prisons-on-25th-week>; Center for Human Rights in Iran, (21 January 2025), 'A Year of Resistance Inside Iran's Prisons Against Executions', CHRI, New York [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://iranhumanrights.org/2025/01/a-year-of-resistance-inside-irans-prisons-against-executions>.
38. Seth Galinsky, (18 November 2024), 'Protests in Iran call for end to the death penalty', The Militant, New York [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://themilitant.com/2024/11/09/protests-in-iran-call-for-end-to-the-death-penalty>.
39. World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, (3 May 2024), 'UNODC must make any cooperation with Iran contingent upon a moratorium on drug-related executions', WCADP, Montreuil, France [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://worldcoalition.org/2024/05/03/call-for-joint-action-to-stop-drug-related-executions-in-iran>; Iran Human Rights, (12 June 2024), 'Lawyers' Open Letter to UNODC: Make Cooperation Contingent on Immediate Moratorium on Drug Executions', IHRNGO, Oslo [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6759>.
40. Adam Hancock, (14 December 2024), 'Singapore steps up executions amid pressure on anti-death penalty groups', Al Jazeera, Singapore [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/14/singapore-steps-up-executions-and-pressure-on-anti-death-penalty-groups](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/14/singapore-steps-up-executions-and-pressure-on-anti-death-penalty-groups).

with misinformation on drug traffickers and the death penalty” and evoke sympathy for people on death row.<sup>41</sup> The Minister also shared activists’ names and email addresses in a move which has been interpreted by many as harassment.<sup>42</sup> The same ministry also issued a record nine Correction Directions and Targeted Correction Directions under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) for death penalty-related content. The Directions require those issued with them to correct ‘falsehoods’ and publish ‘correction notices’ to echo the government’s position on executions and capital punishment. These were issued against the Transformative Justice Collective (TJC), the Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN), individual activists, the Online Citizen and Meta (for social media posts by ADPAN and TJC).<sup>43</sup>

On 20 December 2024, the Minister for Digital Development labelled the online platforms of TJC – one of the few independent media outlets that regularly reports on the death penalty and drug policy in Singapore – as ‘Declared Online Locations’. This required TJC to post notices on ‘falsehoods’ found on its pages and prevented the organisation from receiving financial or other support.<sup>44</sup> In January 2025 this led to TJC temporarily ceasing all its online operations, depriving public opinion of an important ‘platform for marginalised voices, including those of death row prisoners, their families, and other vulnerable communities’.<sup>45</sup> Efforts to curtail anti-death penalty advocacy also occurred offline. In October 2024, the Infocomm Media Development Authority denied TJC the licence for an exhibition on the history of the abolitionist movement in Singapore, claiming it would paint a ‘misleading picture’ of capital punishment in the country.<sup>46</sup> The following month, police investigated and interrogated over 20 people who had participated in silent vigils before executions.<sup>47</sup>

The combined effects of these initiatives, coupled with the execution of people with ongoing legal proceedings, risks creating a climate of fear and self-censorship, which deprives the public of essential information and hinders the effective representation of people facing capital punishment.

41. Government of Singapore, Ministry of Home Affairs, (8 May 2024), ‘Ministerial Statement on Singapore’s National Drug Control Policy – Speech by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister of Law’, MHA, Singapore [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/ministerial-statement-on-singapore-national-drug-control-policy](http://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/ministerial-statement-on-singapore-national-drug-control-policy).

42. *Ibid.*

43. For more details, see the Government of Singapore, POFMA Office website. Available from [www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg](http://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg).

44. Government of Singapore, Ministry of Digital Development and Information, (20 December 2024), Operators of Transformative Justice Collective’s Online Platforms Prohibited from Receiving Financial Benefit due to History of Communicating Multiple Falsehoods, POFMA, Singapore, Available from [www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/files/media-releases/pofma\\_pr\\_mddi\\_20Dec2024.pdf](http://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/files/media-releases/pofma_pr_mddi_20Dec2024.pdf).

45. The Online Citizen, (21 January 2025), ‘Transformative Justice Collective to cease website and social media operations until Dec 2026’, TOC, Taiwan [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/01/21/transformative-justice-collective-to-cess-website-and-social-media-operations-until-dec-2026](http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2025/01/21/transformative-justice-collective-to-cess-website-and-social-media-operations-until-dec-2026).

46. Transformative Justice Collective, (7 October 2024), ‘BLOCKED: Fighting for Life’, TJC, Singapore [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2024/10/07/blocked-fighting-for-life>.

47. Transformative Justice Collective, (18 December 2024), ‘Statement: Citizens Investigated for Holding Vigil’, TJC, Singapore [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/2024/12/18/statement-citizens-investigated-for-holding-vigil>.

Two countries – Indonesia and Malaysia – remain in the ‘high application’ category despite a lack of executions due to the substantial number of death sentences regularly imposed for drug offences. Although the last execution in **Indonesia** took place in 2016, courts continue sentencing dozens of people to death a year, overwhelmingly for drug offences. HRI confirmed 73 drug-related death sentences in 2024, the lowest figure since 2020. Notably, some 20 death sentences were imposed, not in first instance, but on appeal. According to Yosua Octavian, Casework Coordinator at LBH Masyarakat, this could be due to:

*the closed nature of the examination process at the High Court (PT) and Supreme Court (MA) levels, unlike at District Court level. District Court hearings are open to the public. While High Courts and the Supreme Court only review case documents, and there rarely are hearings. Another underlying reason may pertain to judicial training and capacity building: judges at the District Court level likely receive more frequent training, which may contribute to a greater level of discernment in their decision-making, possibly preventing the immediate imposition of the death penalty. Unfortunately, it appears that such training may be less common at the High Court and Supreme Court levels, which could potentially explain certain judicial outcomes.<sup>48</sup>*

In December 2024, **Indonesia** made headlines for agreeing to repatriate Mary Jane Veloso to the Philippines after she was arrested in 2010 for drug smuggling and narrowly escaped execution in 2015.<sup>49</sup> Shortly thereafter, in January 2025, Indonesia agreed to repatriate a French national sentenced to death for drug offences and imprisoned for 20 years.<sup>50</sup> Despite positive developments, the position of the new government towards the death penalty and drug control remains unclear. Budi Gunawan, Minister for Political and Security Affairs, claimed in December 2024 that “Indonesia is likely to consider accelerating the execution of the death penalty for prisoners convicted of drug offenses to create a stronger deterrent effect”.<sup>51</sup> If this happens, it will be a worrying development in a country where the majority of its ever-growing death row population has been convicted of drug offences (360 out of 559 people on death row; 55 more than in 2023).

In **Malaysia**, the July 2023 reform had a clear impact on 2024 trends. The reform removed the mandatory nature of the death penalty for all relevant crimes, including drug trafficking, and allowed people on death row to have their sentences reviewed by a judicial panel. The resentencing process led to a significant reduction in the number of people on death row, most of whom had been convicted of drug offences; civil society reports

48. E-mail communication with Yosua Octavian, 31 January 2025.

49. Al Jazeera, (18 December 2024), ‘Mary Jane Veloso, Filipina nearly executed in Indonesia, arrives home’, Al Jazeera, Doha [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/18/mary-jane-veloso-filipina-nearly-executed-in-indonesia-arrives-home](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/18/mary-jane-veloso-filipina-nearly-executed-in-indonesia-arrives-home).

50. Oman al Yahyai, (4 February 2025), ‘French death row inmate Serge Atlaoui repatriated from Indonesia’, Euro News, Lyon [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.euronews.com/2025/02/04/french-death-row-inmate-serge-atlaoui-repatriated-from-indonesia](http://www.euronews.com/2025/02/04/french-death-row-inmate-serge-atlaoui-repatriated-from-indonesia).

51. Xinhua, (5 December 2024), ‘Indonesia to consider accelerating death penalty for drug offenders’, Xinhua, Jakarta [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://english.news.cn/20241205/c36b86096de54ee190248c49943ea172/c.html>.

that all drug-related death sentences that underwent resentencing were commuted. In the absence of official figures, it is unclear how many people remain on death row today, but over 800 people had their sentences commuted for all crimes.<sup>52</sup> While indisputably a positive development, people released from death row report significant struggles to reintegrate into society and a lack of adequate support.<sup>53</sup>

Malaysian courts seem to be exercising the discretion finally accorded to them, as there has been a drop in known drug-related death sentences (ten in 2024, although the actual figure could be higher). In several death-eligible drug trafficking cases, defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment instead, with courts often citing the fact that they were a mere drug courier, or that they should be given an opportunity to change and return to society after imprisonment. Conversely, in cases where death sentences were imposed, recurring reasons were the quantity of drugs, the type of drugs, and the gravity of the 'drug situation' in the territory. Amnesty International, which monitored new death sentences imposed since the adoption of the reform, reported that courts imposed the alternative punishment to the death penalty in 82% of cases. While welcoming the drop in total death sentences, the organisation expressed concern on its finding that '49% of all recorded cases in which the death penalty was imposed or upheld (22 out of 45) since July 2023 were for drug-related offences', and that such sentences continued being imposed based on legal presumptions, which contravenes central fair trial standards.<sup>54</sup> In October 2024, the Malaysian Ministry of Health indicated there is no further plan to fully remove death as a punishment for drug offences.<sup>55</sup>

At least 113 people were sentenced to death for drug offences in **Vietnam**, including at least six women, and seven foreign nationals (from Lao PDR, Thailand and Cambodia). Drug offences appear to remain the main crime for which people are sentenced to death in the country. The 40% drop in confirmed drug-related sentences between 2023 and 2024 could be attributed to the scarcity of information filtering from the country.

A slight decrease in known death sentences was also recorded in **Singapore** where five people are known to have been sentenced to death for drug offences in 2024, compared with nine in 2023. Drug trafficking appears to be the only offence for which death sentences were meted out in the country in 2024. This, combined with execution figures and the fact that 96% of people on death row have been convicted for drug offences, suggests Singapore sees capital punishment almost exclusively as a tool of

52. Muhammad Yusry, (6 November 2024), 'Over 800 death row sentences commuted to imprisonment under new Act, says Azalina', Malay Mail, Kuala Lumpur [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/11/06/over-800-death-row-sentences-commuted-to-imprisonment-under-new-act-says-azalina/156042](http://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/11/06/over-800-death-row-sentences-commuted-to-imprisonment-under-new-act-says-azalina/156042).
53. Sinar Daily, (28 July 2024), 'Struggles of former death row inmates highlighting need for better support systems', Sinar Daily, Kuala Lumpur [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.sindaily.my/article/219945/culture/features/struggles-of-former-death-row-inmates-highlight-need-for-better-support-systems](http://www.sindaily.my/article/219945/culture/features/struggles-of-former-death-row-inmates-highlight-need-for-better-support-systems).
54. Amnesty International, (4 July 2024), Malaysia: One Year since Repeal of Mandatory Death Penalty, Violations of International Law and Standards Continue Despite Overall Decrease in Death Sentences [public statement], Amnesty International, London . Available from [www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ACT5082482024ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ACT5082482024ENGLISH.pdf).
55. Code Blue, (30 October 2024), 'No Plans to Drop Death Penalty From Dangerous Drugs Act: MOH', Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy, Kuala Lumpur [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://codeblue.galencentre.org/2024/10/no-plans-to-drop-death-penalty-from-dangerous-drugs-act-moh>.

drug control. One drug-related death sentence was commuted on appeal. In at least one case, judges exercised the limited discretion envisaged by the Misuse of Drugs Act to sentence a defendant to life imprisonment rather than death, as the defendant was deemed to be a mere ‘drug courier’ and had assisted with anti-drug trafficking operations.

Piecemeal information also allows HRI to confirm drug-related death sentences in China, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In **China**, an academic article published in early 2024 concluded that ‘judicial imposition of capital punishment on drug offenses has shown a peculiar rising pattern in recent years despite death sentences overall having dropped’. The article confirmed that most people sentenced to death on drug charges come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>56</sup> An analysis of a new batch of judgments published by the Supreme People’s Court in February 2024 also confirmed that drug crimes, together with murder and robbery, are the main offences for which people are sentenced to death in the country. This analysis finds that appeal courts give some consideration to the role defendants have played in the crime and will overturn death sentences for people considered to have been mere accessories. At the same time, other sources report extremely high conviction rates.<sup>57</sup> In November 2024, news emerged of the release of Mark Swidan, an American citizen who had been on death row for a decade after being convicted of drug offences, whose trial had raised significant due process issues.<sup>58</sup>

One drug-related death sentence was confirmed in **Iran**, against an Afghan student convicted of drug trafficking.<sup>59</sup> Another drug-related death sentence was confirmed in **Saudi Arabia**, against an Indian migrant worker who maintains they were framed.<sup>60</sup> Due to the pace of executions in both countries and their extreme approaches to drugs,<sup>61</sup> these are just the tip of the iceberg of drug-related death sentences. Hundreds (if not thousands) of people are believed to be on death row for drug offences in the Islamic Republic. In Saudi Arabia, the death row population has been described as large, particularly after 2023 when the Kingdom intensified its ‘war on drugs’, the targets of which faced systematic abuses and underwent trials that lacked basic due process guarantees.<sup>62</sup> Over 20 Egyptian nationals remain on death row for drug offences in Saudi Arabia, at imminent risk of execution.<sup>63</sup>

56. Michelle Miao, (2024), ‘Does a Lawyer Make a Difference? A Study on the Sentencing of Death-Eligible Drug Offenders in China’, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 114, no. 2.
57. Dui Hua Human Rights Journal, (15 July 2024), ‘Curious Timing: SPC Death Penalty Reviews Posted After Universal Periodic Review’, Dui Hua Foundation, San Francisco [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.duihuahrjournal.org/2024/07/curious-timing-spc-death-penalty.html](http://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2024/07/curious-timing-spc-death-penalty.html).
58. Cloud House, (27 November 2024), ‘RELEASE: Rep. Cloud Celebrates the Release of Mark Swidan After Over a Decade of Unjust Detention in China’, Michael Cloud, Texas [online media release, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://cloud.house.gov/posts/release-rep-cloud-celebrates-the-release-of-mark-swidan-after-over-a-decade-of-unjust-detention-in-china>.
59. Abdul Ghafar Azizi, (20 September 2024), ‘25-Year-Old Afghan Man Sentenced to Death in Iran’, *TOLO News*, Kabul Francisco [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/provincial-190813>.
60. Press Trust of India, (4 December 2024), ‘UP Man Given Death Penalty in Saudi Arabia on Drug Charges, Family Pleads for Mercy’, *NDTV*, New Delhi [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ndtv.com/world-news/up-man-given-death-penalty-in-saudi-arabia-on-drug-charges-family-pleads-for-mercy-7172972](http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/up-man-given-death-penalty-in-saudi-arabia-on-drug-charges-family-pleads-for-mercy-7172972).
61. As an example, see Iran International, (5 May 2024), ‘Iran Attorney General Says ‘No Mercy’ For Drug Traffickers’, *Volant Media UK*, London [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.iranintl.com/en/202405056330](http://www.iranintl.com/en/202405056330).
62. European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, (2025), *Blood Era: A Historic Record of Executions in Saudi Arabia 2024*, ESOHR, Berlin.
63. Middle East Eye, (23 August 2024), ‘Saudi Arabia: 34 Egyptians among dozens facing execution for drug offences’, *MEE*, London [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-dozens-face-execution-over-drug-offences-says-rights-group](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-dozens-face-execution-over-drug-offences-says-rights-group).

Meanwhile, citizens of ‘high application’ countries continue facing the death penalty abroad for drug offences: 165 Indonesians reportedly risk execution as foreign nationals (primarily in Malaysia), mostly for drug crimes.<sup>64</sup> Seventy-four Malaysians are on death row for drug offences in other countries.<sup>65</sup> At least eight Iranians remain on death row for drug offences in Indonesia.

Several ‘high application’ countries underwent UN treaty body reviews in 2024. Among others, **Indonesia** received recommendations to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right which aims to abolish the death penalty and ‘restrict the crimes for which the death penalty may be imposed to the most serious crimes, understood to be crimes involving intentional killing’, with drug offences highlighted as a particular concern.<sup>66</sup> The Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concern for the overrepresentation of members of ethnic and ethno-religious minority groups among those sentenced to the death penalty for drug-related offences in **Iran**. It also stressed the overrepresentation of foreign nationals, including migrant workers, among those sentenced to death in **Saudi Arabia**. In both cases, it recommended establishing a moratorium on executions and publishing disaggregated statistics on capital punishment.<sup>67</sup> During its fourth round of the Universal Periodic Review, **Vietnam** accepted some of the many recommendations it received on capital punishment, but none of those that specifically mentioned the death penalty for drug offences.<sup>68</sup>

64. Independent Observer, (21 June 2024), ‘165 Indonesian Citizens Face Death Penalty, Kemlu Reveals’, Independent Observer, Jakarta [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://observerid.com/165-indonesian-citizens-face-death-penalty-kemlu-reveals>.

65. Essa Abu Yamin, (17 October 2024), ‘74 warga Malaysia dikenakan hukuman mati di luar negara’, BH Online, Kuala Lumpur [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2024/10/1312314/74-warga-malaysia-dikenakan-hukuman-mati-di-luar-negara](http://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2024/10/1312314/74-warga-malaysia-dikenakan-hukuman-mati-di-luar-negara).

66. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (14 March 2024), ‘Concluding Observations on the second periodic report of Indonesia’, UN Doc. E/C.12/IDN/CO/2, OHCHR, Geneva; Human Rights Committee, (3 May 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Indonesia’, UN Doc. CCPR/C/IDN/CO/2, OHCHR, Geneva.

67. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, (19 September 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the combined twentieth to twenty-seventh periodic reports of the Islamic Republic of Iran’, UN Doc. CERD/C/IRN/CO/20-27, OHCHR, Geneva; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, (24 December 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the combined tenth and eleventh periodic reports of Saudi Arabia’, UN Doc. CERD/C/SAU/CO/10-11, OHCHR, Geneva.

68. For all documents related to the Universal Periodic Review of Vietnam, see [www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/vn-index](http://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/vn-index).

# LOW APPLICATION STATES

Country	Death sentences for drug offences 2024 (% of total)	Death sentences for drug offences 2023 (% of total)	People on death row for drug offences 2024 (% of total)	People on death row for drug offences 2023 (% of total)
Bahrain	0 (-)	0 (-)	4+ (15%)	4+ (15%)
Bangladesh	3+ (1%)	1+ (0.2%)	10+ (0.4%)	10+ (0.4%)
Egypt	10+ (2%)	9+ (2%)	Unknown	Unknown
Iraq	144+ (68%)	19+ (14%)	150+ (2%)	20+ (0.2%)
Kuwait	0 (-)	12 (67%)	12+ (40%)	12+ (40%)
Lao PDR	2+ (100%)	4+ (unknown)	300+ (unknown)	300+ (unknown)
Pakistan	3+ (6%)	Unknown	20 (0.6%)	444 (12%)
Sri Lanka	1+ (3%)	6 (6%)	88+ (7%)	60+ (5%)
Thailand	Unknown	Unknown	232 (67%)	183 (62%)
United Arab Emirates	0 (-)	4+ (100%)	4+ (27%)	4+ (27%)
Yemen	13+ (unknown)	7+ (9%)	20+ (12%)	7+ (4%)



Countries are classified as ‘low application’ if no executions for drug offences were carried out in the past five years, but a limited number of death sentences for drug offences were imposed.

HRI confirmed 176 death sentences in ‘low application’ countries throughout 2024. This figure is almost four times higher than in 2023, when 54 death sentences were recorded in this cluster of countries.

One major driver of this increase is the record-high number of drug-related death sentences documented in **Iraq**. The country’s General Directorate for Drug Control and Psychotropic Substances reported 144 drug-related death sentences in 2024.<sup>69</sup> HRI monitoring indicates that of these, three were imposed against women and seven against foreign nationals (including one woman), although the exact number is likely higher. Overall, this represents a 658% increase from 2023, which also contributed to the rise in the number of people on death row for drug offences in the country (150+). This significant jump could be explained by Iraq’s renewed ‘war on drugs’, with drug trafficking seen as a ‘critical threat’ to the country’s national security. In a statement delivered in December 2023, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani urged the country’s President to ratify all death sentences for people convicted of drug offences, claiming that the punishment would “be a deterrent to anyone who dares to threaten the security of the country and its people”.<sup>70</sup> Human rights organisations raised concerns following this statement, fearing the potential arbitrary application of the death sentence and the ineffectiveness of the punishment in deterring crime.<sup>71</sup> This stance has also resulted in an ongoing legislative process to amend Law No. 50 of 2017 on Drug and Psychotropic Substances which aims to expand the applicability of the death penalty to more drug offences, among other things.<sup>72</sup>

Notably, executions for other crimes skyrocketed between 2023 and 2024 in the country, mostly for charges of terrorism. Some were carried out as mass executions, following grave human rights violations. Combined with the surge in drug-related death sentences, these developments raise fears that drug-related executions may soon take place in Iraq. Several UN mechanisms have criticised Iraq’s excessive use of the death penalty for crimes that do not fall into the category of the ‘most serious’ and raised concerns over the issue of fair trial.<sup>73</sup>

69. Iraq News Agency, (28 December 2024), ‘Drug Control Directorate: 14,438 suspects arrested, 598 drug dealers sentenced to death or life imprisonment’, INA, Baghdad [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://ina.iq/eng/37344-drug-control-directorate-14438-suspects-arrested-598-drug-dealers-sentenced-to-death-or-life-imprisonment.html>.

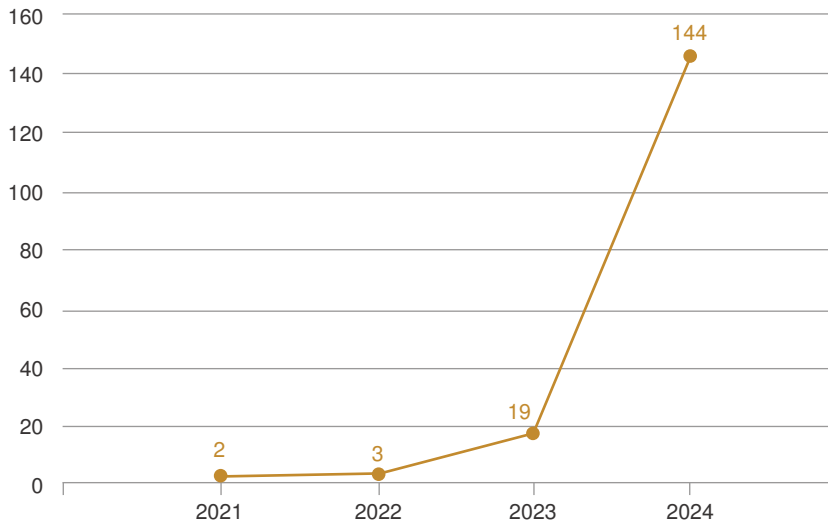
70. Shafaq News, (15 May 2024), ‘Nearly 100 death sentences, life sentences in drug trafficking crackdown: official’, Shafaq News, Baghdad [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Nearly-100-death-sentences-life-sentences-in-drug-trafficking-crackdown-official>.

71. Ibid.

72. Iraq News Agency, (21 September 2024), ‘The Parliamentary Committee Details the Amendments to the Narcotics Law’, INA, Baghdad [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://ina.iq/eng/34868-the-parliamentary-committee-details-the-amendments-to-the-narcotics-law.html>.

73. Among others, see OHCHR, (27 June 2024), ‘UN Special Procedures communication to Iraq, Ref. UA IRQ 3/2024’, OHCHR, Geneva [online document, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29197>.

# KNOWN DEATH SENTENCES FOR DRUG OFFENCES IN IRAQ (2021-2024)



Other countries in this category continue to sentence people to death for drug offences. In **Bangladesh**, at least three people were sentenced to death, one of them a woman from Botswana. Ten people were sentenced to death in **Egypt**, of which six were in absentia (not present in court). In **Yemen**, 13 death sentences were confirmed for drug trafficking – an 86% increase from 2023.

**Pakistan** received widespread praise for its decision to abolish the death penalty for drug offences in 2023, including from the High Commissioner on Human Rights.<sup>74</sup> However, evidence indicates there have been problems in implementing this reform. According to Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), at least three people received death sentences for drug offences in 2024, and 20 people remained on death row for drug offences as of February 2025.<sup>75</sup> For this reason, the decision was made to keep Pakistan in the ‘low application’ category and to continue reporting on the country. Reflecting on this development, JPP observed: “Possible reasons for the continued imposition of the death penalty in narcotics cases include a lack of awareness of the new law, adherence to personal or ideological beliefs, procedural inconsistencies, or misinterpretation of legal provisions. Such discrepancies reflect the broader challenge of ensuring consistent application of legal reforms across the judiciary.”<sup>76</sup> In its Concluding Observation on the second periodic report of Pakistan in November 2024, the Human Rights Committee expressed concerns about the continued application of the death penalty for drug offences and called for a moratorium on capital punishment to be maintained.<sup>77</sup>

74. OHCHR, (14 March 2024), ‘Türk urges transformative change in global drug policy’ OHCHR, Geneva [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/03/turk-urges-transformative-change-global-drug-policy?sub-site=HRC](http://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/03/turk-urges-transformative-change-global-drug-policy?sub-site=HRC).

75. Communication with Justice Project Pakistan, 21 February 2025.

76. Justice Project Pakistan, (2024), Death Penalty in Pakistan: Data Mapping Capital Punishment 2024, JPP, Lahore. Available from <https://jpp.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Death-Penalty-2024.pdf>.

77. Human Rights Committee, (2 December 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Pakistan’, UN Doc. CCPR/C/PAK/CO/2, OHCHR, Geneva.

In **Lao PDR**, two men – one of them Vietnamese – are confirmed to have received a death sentence for drug offences. As the ‘crackdown on drugs’ launched by the government in 2021 is still ongoing, the number of death sentences is expected to be higher.<sup>78</sup> In the years for which data is available, all known death sentences were imposed for drug offences (2 in 2024, 4 in 2023 and 39 in 2022), and most of the people on death row are believed to have been convicted of drug offences.

A repressive anti-drug campaign continued being documented in **Sri Lanka**, where one person was confirmed to have received a death sentence for drug dealing. After its launch in December 2023, Yukhtiya, the anti-drugs operation, continued in 2024. By February, 58,000 raids had been carried out, resulting in 58,234 arrests.<sup>79</sup> In three months, the number of people arrested through the operation doubled to 113,974.<sup>80</sup> Although the government claimed the operation was a success, citing a decrease in drug seizures and a reduction in crime rates,<sup>81</sup> human rights experts, including the country’s National Human Rights Commission and the UN, have denounced it for its perpetration of grave human rights violations (including the right to health and the right to be free from torture and ill-treatment) and called for the operation to be immediately suspended.<sup>82</sup>

No drug-related death sentences were confirmed in **Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates** in 2024, although it is possible that more information will emerge. For example, judicial statistics on the number of death sentences for drug offences imposed in 2023 in Kuwait were only made available in July 2024 (confirming 12 death sentences for drug offences in 2023).<sup>83</sup>

78. Oun Kao, (7 November 2023), ‘Drugs are not a cure, the government is spreading the word of the nation’, RFA, Lao [translated online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rfa.org/lao/daily/health/drug-problem-hard-to-solve-due-to-many-people-use-drug-11082023112553.html](http://www.rfa.org/lao/daily/health/drug-problem-hard-to-solve-due-to-many-people-use-drug-11082023112553.html); Champa Thong, (17 June 2024), ‘The national drug crackdown has not been resolved or eased’, RFA, Lao [translated online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rfa.org/lao/daily/health/drug-police-laos-prime-minister-06182024092851.html](http://www.rfa.org/lao/daily/health/drug-police-laos-prime-minister-06182024092851.html).
79. Rathindra Kuruwita, (26 February 2024), ‘Are Sri Lanka’s Anti-Drug Crime Operations Working?’, The Diplomat, Washington DC [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/are-sri-lankas-anti-drug-crime-operations-working/>.
80. Ambika Satkunanathan, (30 May 2024), ‘Failure of the anti-drug operation in Sri Lanka: Separating fact from fiction’, Sri Lanka Brief, Colombo [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://srilankabrief.org/failure-of-the-anti-drug-operation-in-sri-lanka-separating-fact-from-fiction>.
81. Among others, see Sandun Jayawardana, (21 January 2024), ‘One month into ‘Yukhtiya’, authorities hail it as a success’, The Sunday Times, Colombo [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.sundaytimes.lk/240121/news/one-month-into-yukhtiya-authorities-hail-it-as-a-success-545853.html](http://www.sundaytimes.lk/240121/news/one-month-into-yukhtiya-authorities-hail-it-as-a-success-545853.html).
82. Among others, see Ambika Satkunanathan, (30 May 2024), ‘Failure of the anti-drug operation in Sri Lanka: Separating fact from fiction’, Sri Lanka Brief, Colombo [online article, accessed February 2025]; Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, (8 January 2024), ‘Press Notice: The ‘Yukhtiya’ Operation’, HRCSL, Colombo [online media release, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/HRCSL-Press-Notice-08012024.pdf](http://www.hrcsl.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/HRCSL-Press-Notice-08012024.pdf); OHCHR, (22 January 2024), ‘UN experts call on Sri Lanka to immediately suspend and review ‘Yukhtiya’ anti-drug operation’, OHCHR, Geneva [online media release, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/un-experts-call-sri-lanka-immediately-suspend-and-review-yukhtiya-anti-drug](http://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/01/un-experts-call-sri-lanka-immediately-suspend-and-review-yukhtiya-anti-drug).
83. Ramadan al Sherbini, (21 July 2024), ‘Kuwait courts issued one death sentence a month in drug-related cases last year’, Gulf News, Cairo [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-courts-issued-one-death-sentence-a-month-in-drug-related-cases-last-year-1.103566684>.

# KNOWN DEATH SENTENCES FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2024)



- Iraq - 144
- Vietnam - 113
- Indonesia - 73
- Yemen - 13
- Egypt - 10
- Malaysia - 10
- Singapore - 5
- Pakistan - 3
- Bangladesh - 3
- Lao - 2
- Sri Lanka - 1
- ☒ China - Unknown
- ☒ Iran - Unknown
- ☒ Kuwait - Unknown
- ☒ North Korea - Unknown
- ☒ Saudi Arabia - Unknown
- ☒ Thailand - Unknown

Death row figures appear to have increased in several countries in this category, including **Iraq**, **Sri Lanka** and **Yemen**. In **Thailand**, which remains the only country in this category to publish official, disaggregated and updated figures, 67% of people on death row had been convicted for drug offences (as of October 2024), 5% more than in 2023. Of the 35 women on death row in Thailand, all but one are convicted for drug offences. Regrettably, the government rejected a proposal by the National Human Rights Commission to abolish the death penalty by arguing that the punishment remains necessary in the country.<sup>84</sup>

Of the estimated 500-600 people on death row in **Lao PDR** in 2023, 90% had reportedly been convicted of drug offences. Although the government indicated a plan to commute death sentences in late 2024, it is unclear whether the death row population has decreased,<sup>85</sup> but it is likely that drug offences remain the main crime for which people are on death row in the country.

As of February 2025, 20 people remain on death row for drug offences in Pakistan. According to JPP this calls for 'a closer examination of the region's judicial and sentencing practices, particularly in light of the ongoing reforms aimed at reducing the use of capital punishment'.<sup>86</sup>

84. Mongkol Bangprapa, (17 December 2024), 'Cabinet refuses to abolish capital punishment', Bangkok Post, Bangkok [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2921596/cabinet-refuses-to-abolish-capital-punishment](http://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2921596/cabinet-refuses-to-abolish-capital-punishment).  
 85. Phouong, (23 September 2024), 'December marks 49 years, good behaviour prisoners will be commuted', RFA [translated online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.rfa.org/lao/daily/politics/lao-authority-pardon-prisoners-09232024212546.html](http://www.rfa.org/lao/daily/politics/lao-authority-pardon-prisoners-09232024212546.html).  
 86. Justice Project Pakistan, (2024), Death Penalty in Pakistan: Data Mapping Capital Punishment 2024, JPP, Lahore.

Although no execution took place in countries within this category, nationals of some of these countries continue to be executed or sentenced to death for drug offences abroad. At least 10 Yemenis, 12 Egyptians and 17 Pakistanis were executed for drug offences in Saudi Arabia, while 6 Laotians and 1 Thai national were sentenced to death in Vietnam.

Throughout 2024, UN bodies and mechanisms continued to address the use of capital punishment by several other countries in this category. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its Concluding Observations on **Bahrain**, raised concerns on the absence of fair trial guarantees for people with disabilities in many cases, including drug-related ones. The Committee further recommended that the country “impose an immediate moratorium on executions and not impose any new death sentences, especially against persons with disabilities”.<sup>87</sup>

**Bangladesh** received several recommendations around abolition of the death penalty in the fourth cycle Universal Periodic Review, the outcome document of which was adopted by the Human Rights Council in February 2024. None of the recommendations were accepted by the Bangladesh government, which responded by stating that the ‘death penalty remains a valid form of punishment and deterrence for the most serious and heinous crimes... Till now, the Government has not taken any decision to abolish, defer or put moratorium on death penalty’.<sup>88</sup> In August 2024, mass protests led to the ousting of Sheikh Hasina’s regime, which had launched a violent ‘war on drugs’ and expanded the applicability of the death penalty to new drug offences. Its replacement with an interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohammad Yunus, featuring notable human rights activists, raised hopes for a more progressive position on capital punishment.<sup>89</sup> As of March 2025, however, no moratorium has been declared.

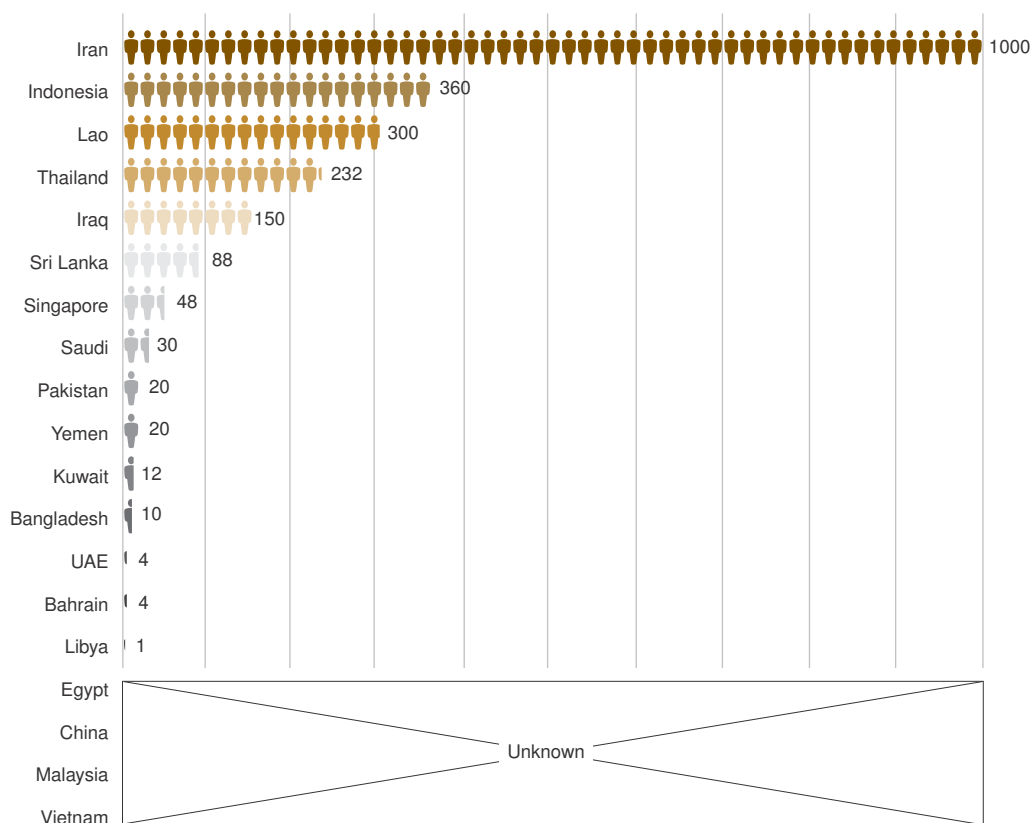
87. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (28 May 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the combined initial and second report of Bahrain’, UN Doc. CRPD/C/BHR/CO/1-2, OHCHR, Geneva.

88. Human Rights Council, (22 February 2024), ‘Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Bangladesh – Addendum’, UN Doc. A/ HRC/55/13/Add.1, OHCHR, Geneva.

89. OHCHR, (30 October 2024), ‘UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk concludes official visit to Bangladesh’, OHCHR, Geneva [online media statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/10/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-official](https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2024/10/un-high-commissioner-human-rights-volker-turk-concludes-official); Saira Rahman Khan, Sara Kowal and Karen G. Dumpit, (15 September 2024), ‘Is It Time to Declare a Moratorium on The Death Penalty in Bangladesh?’, The Diplomat, Washington DC [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://thediplomat.com/2024/09/is-it-time-to-declare-a-moratorium-on-the-death-penalty-in-bangladesh>.

The Committee Against Torture raised the incompatibility of the death penalty for drug offences with international law and standards in its Concluding Observations of Kuwait and **Thailand**. On Thailand, the Committee also highlighted the significant number of women sentenced for drug offences and the reported exclusion of people on death row from drug rehabilitation services available to other people in prison.<sup>90</sup> Among other measures, the Committee recommended that **Kuwait** revise its legislation to restrict the crimes for which the death penalty may be imposed and take steps towards establishing a moratorium on the death penalty and commuting the death sentences of people on death row.<sup>91</sup> Kuwait received a similar recommendation from the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which added the need to ‘provide for gender-specific defences and mitigating circumstances in capital trials, including trauma, gender-based violence, economic pressure and trafficking in persons’.<sup>92</sup>

## PEOPLE KNOWN TO BE ON DEATH ROW FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2024)



90. Committee Against Torture, (9 December 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Thailand’, UN Doc. CAT/C/THA/CO/2, para. 26 – 27, OHCHR, Geneva.

91. Committee Against Torture, (6 December 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Kuwait’, UN Doc CAT/C/KWT/CO/4, para. 34, OHCHR, Geneva.

92. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, (6 June 2024), ‘Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Kuwait’, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/KWT/CO/6, para. 24, OHCHR, Geneva.

# SYMBOLIC APPLICATION STATES

As of 2024, 13 countries are classified as ‘symbolic application’, meaning their legislation allows for the imposition of the death penalty for drug offences, but no one is known to have been sentenced to death or executed for this category of offences in the past five years. However, due to the severe lack of transparency characterising most of these countries, this does not mean that no death sentences were imposed in 2024, or that no individuals are on death row for drug offences.

What is known is that citizens of ‘symbolic application’ countries were sentenced to death or executed abroad in 2024. Saudi Arabia executed one man from **Sudan** and at least 17 **Jordanian** nationals for trafficking amphetamines. A court in Saudi Arabia also sentenced one **Indian** national to death on manufacturing and trafficking charges. The 36-year-old had moved to Saudi Arabia in 2018 to financially support his family and claims to have been wrongly implicated.<sup>93</sup> One **Myanmar** national (who had fled the country to escape the persecution of the Rohingyas) was sentenced to death for trafficking in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, politicians called for the death penalty as a drug-control tool. In **India**, at a rally against ‘drug abuse’, a local leader advocated for capital punishment against those smuggling and selling narcotics to young people.<sup>94</sup> In the **USA**, the now-President Donald Trump repeatedly called for the death penalty against drug traffickers,<sup>95</sup> falsely claiming it would “eradicate drugs”<sup>96</sup> in the country and pointing to China as a model to follow.<sup>97</sup> In stark contrast, the then-President Biden ended his term by commuting the death sentences of 37 out of 40 people on federal death row.<sup>98</sup>

A highly awaited Constitutional Court judgement in **Taiwan** concluded that capital punishment is constitutional ‘to the extent that it was applied to the most serious crimes’.<sup>99</sup> However, the judgement also clarified that its scope ‘did not address the constitutionality of [the] death penalty in general or imposed on other offences (e.g., treason, drug offences)’. This limited the judgement’s scrutiny to homicide offences, for which the

93. Krishna Chaudhary, (5 December 2024), ‘Meerut woman seeks mercy for son sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia’, The Times of India, Meerut, India [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/meerut/desperate-plea-meerut-mother-seeks-mercy-for-son-sentenced-to-death-in-saudi-arabia/articleshow/115981223.cms>.
94. Daily Excelsior, (26 August 2024), ‘Team Jammu takes out rally; Zorawar for death penalty to narcotic smugglers’, Daily Excelsior, Jammu, Kashmir [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.dailyexcelsior.com/team-jammu-takes-out-rally-zorawar-for-death-penalty-to-narcotic-smugglers](http://www.dailyexcelsior.com/team-jammu-takes-out-rally-zorawar-for-death-penalty-to-narcotic-smugglers).
95. Erik Ortiz, (9 November 2024), ‘Trump wants to expand the federal death penalty, setting up legal challenges in second term’, NBC News, New York [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-wants-expand-federal-death-penalty-setting-legal-challenges-seco-rcna178979](http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-wants-expand-federal-death-penalty-setting-legal-challenges-seco-rcna178979).
96. Brandon Hudson, (15 October 2024), ‘Nessel alarmed at Trump’s comments pondering drug dealer death penalties’, Fox2 Detroit, Detroit [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.fox2detroit.com/news/ag-dana-nessel-alarmed-trumps-comments-pondering-drug-dealer-death-penalties](http://www.fox2detroit.com/news/ag-dana-nessel-alarmed-trumps-comments-pondering-drug-dealer-death-penalties).
97. Elizabeth Bruenig, (20 June 2024), ‘Trump Dreams of a Swifter Death Penalty’, The Atlantic, Washington DC, [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/06/trump-death-penalty-policy/678728](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/06/trump-death-penalty-policy/678728).
98. Ruth Comerford, (23 December 2024), ‘Biden commutes most federal death sentences’, BBC, London [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgkxe4xlvx0](http://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgkxe4xlvx0).
99. Constitutional Court of Taiwan, (20 September 2024), ‘The TCC delivers its judgment 113-Hsien-Pan-8 (2024)’, Constitution Court ROC, Taipei, Taiwan [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://cons.judicial.gov.tw/en/docdata.aspx?fid=5506&id=353656>.

petitioners (the 37 people on death row at the time) had been convicted. The judgment also strengthened procedural safeguards in death penalty cases in the country, where no one is currently on death row for drug offences.

In doing so, the court missed an important opportunity to align Taiwan's legislation with international standards on the death penalty, which classify the 'most serious crimes' (to which retentionist countries must restrict imposition of the death penalty) as those that only involve intentional killing and never drug offences. At the same time, the court seemed to leave some space for future cases on this specific issue. However, a sudden resumption in executions in January 2025 may signal the country is not ready to move towards abolition.<sup>100</sup> No one is currently on death row for drug offences in Taiwan, and an Australian woman facing the death penalty for drug smuggling was eventually sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment in October 2024.<sup>101</sup>

Several 'symbolic application' countries underwent reviews by UN treaty bodies throughout 2024. The Committee on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recommended **Cuba** and **Oman** establish moratoria and work towards death penalty abolition.<sup>102</sup> The Human Rights Committee urged **India** to 'take all measures necessary to ensure that the death penalty is provided only for the most serious crimes involving intentional killing'.<sup>103</sup> The Committee Against Torture made similar recommendations to **Jordan**<sup>104</sup> and **South Korea**.<sup>105</sup> The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights expressed concern about **Mauritania's** ongoing criminalisation of drug use and its negative effects on people who use drugs. The Committee thus recommended that the state reviews its drug laws, including the death penalty for drug offences.<sup>106</sup>

**Brunei Darussalam, Cuba and Jordan** underwent their fourth Universal Periodic Reviews, but did not accept any recommendation on the death penalty for drug offences.

100. Reuters, (17 January 2025), 'Taiwan carries out its first execution in five years, upsetting EU, rights groups', Reuters, Taipei, Taiwan [online statement, accessed February 2025]. Available from [www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-carries-out-first-execution-five-years-upsetting-eu-rights-groups-2025-01-17](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-carries-out-first-execution-five-years-upsetting-eu-rights-groups-2025-01-17).

101. Phillip Charlier, (26 October 2024), 'Australian woman sentenced to 16 years in prison for smuggling drugs into Taiwan', Taiwan English News, Taipei, Taiwan [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://taiwanenglishnews.com/australian-woman-sentenced-to-16-years-in-prison-for-smuggling-drugs-into-taiwan>.

102. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, (29 October 2024), 'Concluding observations on the ninth periodic report of Cuba', UN Doc. CEDAW/C/CUB/CO/9, OHCHR, Geneva; Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, (26 February 2024) 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Oman', UN Doc. CEDAW/C/OMN/CO/4, OHCHR, Geneva .

103. Human Rights Committee, (2 September 2024), 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of India', UN Doc. CCPR/C/IND/CO/4, OHCHR, Geneva.

104. Committee Against Torture, (6 December 2024), 'Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Jordan', UN Doc. CAT/C/JOR/CO/4, OHCHR, Geneva.

105. Committee Against Torture, (16 August 2024), 'Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the Republic of Korea', UN Doc. CAT/C/KOR/CO/6, OHCHR, Geneva .

106. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, (19 March 2024), 'Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Mauritania', UN Doc. E/C.12/MRT/CO/2, OHCHR, Geneva.



# INSUFFICIENT DATA

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Three countries are currently classified as having insufficient data, as ongoing conflicts and instability do not allow HRI to realistically document if and how the death penalty is imposed or used for drug offences, or even if the relevant legislation is still in place. Due to the escalation of the conflict and ongoing genocide in Gaza, **Palestine** was reclassified for 2024 from the 'low application' category to the 'insufficient data' one. With the erasure of civilian infrastructure in the territory, the fate of those believed to be on death row for drug (or other) offences remains unclear.

No news emerged of death sentences for drug offences in **Libya**, nor updates on people previously on death row for drug trafficking. In **Syria**, the impact of the fall of the Assad regime (with its close involvement with drug trafficking)<sup>107</sup> remains to be seen. Meanwhile, a record 16 Syrian nationals were executed in Saudi Arabia, reportedly for drug smuggling.

107. Among others, see Caroline Rose and Matthew Zweig, (16 January 2025), 'What Will Happen to Assad's Secret Drug Empire?', Foreign Policy, Washington DC [online article, accessed February 2025]. Available from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/16/syria-captagon-assad-hts-drug-trade>.

**GAINING GROUND:**

**HOW STATES ABOLISH OR**

**RESTRICT APPLICATION**

**OF THE DEATH PENALTY**

**FOR DRUG OFFENCES**

The death penalty is an ineffective and inhumane punishment, prohibited by international law and standards when imposed for drug offences. Yet 34 countries still retain the punishment, and its use as a tool of drug control is a key driver of capital punishment worldwide.

The use of the death penalty for drug offences is not static; it is subject to frequent changes both in law and in practice. In fact, **punishing drug offences with death is a fairly recent phenomenon**. In many cases, it is not the result of domestic, homegrown considerations. Many of the countries that impose the death penalty for drug offences introduced it in domestic legislation around the 1970s to coincide with the US-led launch of a global 'war on drugs'. A spike in countries introducing the death penalty for drug offences occurred around the adoption and ratification of the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (or the 3rd UN Drug Convention), an international agreement which supports this punitive, repressive policy approach.

In the past four decades, some countries have taken significant steps to review this measure, with an eye to abandoning it or reducing its use.

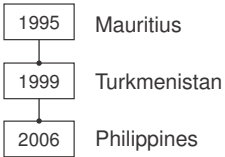
Understanding why and how governments around the world have abolished or restricted the use of the death penalty for drug offences is critical for making progress in countries where use of the death penalty is intensifying, or reform is stalling or seems unachievable.

Such an assessment is key to understanding which actors and factors – social, political, cultural and economic – have influenced these processes, and which legal and policy steps were adopted to achieve this goal. To further this understanding, HRI conducted in-depth research on 17 countries that have removed or restricted the use of the death penalty for drug offences between 1986 and 2023.

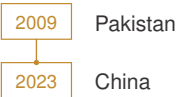
The countries analysed exemplify a broad range of processes, quite different from each other in terms of timeframe, the actors involved, the political and institutional contexts, the driving factors and the end results.

Despite their differences, these experiences can be grouped into five broad categories based on the progress made:

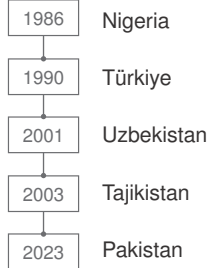
**Abolished the death penalty for all crimes, including drug offences:**



**Introduced sentencing guidelines for death-eligible drug cases:**



**Abolished the death penalty specifically for drug offences:**



**Reduced the crimes eligible for the death penalty:**



**Introduced or expanded alternative punishments to the death penalty:**



HRI's analysis identified recurring threads across these examples which reveal key actors, factors and narratives and the broader social, political and institutional contexts that have enabled progress.

The findings of this work are captured in a report titled *Gaining Ground: How states abolish or restrict application of the death penalty for drug offences*, which can be found [at this link](#). The full report includes comprehensive details of what happened in each country, an in-depth analysis of trends, further examples from the 17 countries for each category, plus a full description of the report's research methodology and sources. This section summarises the report's key findings and recommendations that advocates, policymakers and practitioners can use to move towards total death penalty abolition, and drug policies centred around dignity, health and rights. This is especially important in the context of the increased use of capital punishment as a tool of drug control.

# 1. AGENTS OF CHANGE

## Local actors

While the analysed processes differ – sometimes significantly – in terms of context, driving factors, outcomes and impact, one element recurs in virtually all of them: the dominant role of domestic actors. It is clear from our research that reform is a process driven by local actors.

There is evidence that the following elements led to effective action:

- Diverse coalitions of actors, comprising NGOs, lawyers and academics as well as people personally affected by the issue, such as the families of people on death row (as further described below). Effective approaches worked on distinct levels and with different strategies, but always with a bottom-up approach.

In the **Philippines**, the Coalition Against the Death Penalty played a key role. This is a diverse, highly coordinated group comprising the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines, human rights lawyers, prison volunteers, clergymen, NGOs, human rights defenders, families of political prisoners and of people on death row, with close ties to the Commission on Human Rights and members of Congress who oppose the death penalty. The Coalition's strategy included constitutional challenges, appeals to international bodies, research, high-level advocacy, capacity building, campaigns and protests, public education, providing legal support to people facing death sentences, and volunteering in the country's prisons.

In **Indonesia**, amendments to death penalty legislation, which came as part of a broader reform process, were mostly driven by members of Parliament and the Executive, with local civil society playing a vital role through advocacy, lobbying, submissions of evidence and constructive proposals. Many of the arguments made by local civil society (for example, on fair trial violations and the disproportionate impact of the death penalty on people acting as low-level drug couriers) shaped political debates.

- Engaged and empowered local civil society providing expertise. Often, NGO-led research and advocacy revealed systemic shortcomings of capital drug cases, which helped governments identify avenues for reducing the use of capital punishment.

- In **Pakistan**, the power of NGO research was demonstrated when evidence gathered by local NGOs revealed systemic shortcomings of capital drug cases. This helped the government find pathways for reducing the use of capital punishment. Strategic engagement and awareness raising with political actors was then key, as was sharing this information with diplomats and EU and human rights mechanisms, which mobilised international and domestic support for reform.
- Using an individualised approach to appeal to different stakeholders. This approach looks beyond institutional positions and is sensitive to personal values and priorities. Activists interviewed recalled the strategic importance of engaging with different sides of the political spectrum, going beyond ideological stances and finding effective arguments for each person, and strategically connecting to the actors closest to the issue. In many contexts, technical, operational actors became unexpected allies as they had seen first-hand the ineffectiveness of the death penalty and extreme drug responses.
- The importance of local ‘champions’ or institutional actors who prioritise the issue and take reform forward, often in acts of individualised advocacy. This appears to be particularly important when dealing with highly divisive issues, such as the death penalty *and* drug control.

## Families of people on death row

Families of people on death row or executed can be important change agents. They can advocate for reform from a unique standpoint, and women often take centre stage.

In some countries there is growing awareness and coordination among families, but the phenomenon is not new. One of the oldest examples comes from **Uzbekistan** where Mothers Against the Death Penalty – mothers of people executed, sentenced to death or facing the death penalty – catalysed the abolition movement. Founded in the early 2000s, the group self-organised campaigns, and members taught themselves law, so they were able to assist in cases. Coordination among the families of people on death row is also present in **Singapore**. In part, this is credited to the fact that, because of legal reform in 2012, people tend to stay on death row for longer. This means their families have more time to learn about and interact with the criminal legal system and to organise and exchange information. In recent years, family members in **Iran** have been increasingly protesting drug-related executions in front of prisons and condemning the practice including through the language of human rights and international law. Coordinated protests by families of people on death row for drug offences have been increasing since 2022, in line with the rise in protests connected to the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. These protests continue as of 2024, despite arrests and repression.

## Courts

In some countries, judicial processes emerged as important spaces for reviewing the use of the death penalty for drug offences, and in many cases reforming it. In **Pakistan**, the introduction of sentencing guidelines in drug cases contained in the Ghulam Murtaza judgment led to a drastic reduction in higher courts issuing drug-related death sentences, with the Supreme Court striking down virtually all drug-related death sentences that reached it.<sup>108</sup> This paved the way for bump-free abolition of the death penalty for drug-related offences in 2023. This judicial approach was due both to the actions and attitudes of specific judges and a more general reluctance from higher courts, particularly the Supreme Court, to impose death sentences for crimes that are not perceived as the most serious. This has also been the case in **Taiwan**, where activists describe judges' 'self-restraining' attitude to capital punishment as the main reason for the absence of drug-related death sentences in Taiwan since 2006. This judicial approach may have carried more weight than Taiwan's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or a 1992 reform which made the death penalty a discretionary, rather than a mandatory, punishment for drug offences.

Judgments often pave the way for legal reform, even in cases that are unsuccessful or have limited direct impact. In **India**, in 2011 the Indian Harm Reduction Network challenged the constitutionality of the mandatory death penalty for drug offences, hoping the punishment would be deemed unconstitutional and would therefore be removed from the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 1985 (NDPS). The 2011 case was only partially successful; the mandatory nature of the death penalty was found to be unconstitutional as it stripped judges of discretion, but the death penalty was retained as a discretionary punishment. The discretionary nature of the death penalty for drug offences was eventually codified in law in 2014 through an amendment to the NDPS. The shift from mandatory to discretionary sentencing has clearly affected judicial attitudes towards defendants in capital drug cases, reflected by the fact that virtually no drug-related death sentence in India has become final since 2012. The 2011 case also provided an important opportunity to introduce new arguments to the Indian legal system, laying the foundations for further discussions.

108. *Ghulam Murtaza and another v The State* was a landmark 2009 case. In the Supreme Court judgment, Justice Khosa criticised extreme inconsistencies in drug-related judgments, describing sentences as "hideously variable as they oscillated and fluctuated between unduly lenient and grossly oppressive". For more on this case, see the Pakistan case study in the full report.

## The international community

While domestic actors are the driving force behind reforms, the international community also plays a key role. However, the potential impact of different international processes and actors, as well as their willingness to engage, is highly dependent on context. The strategic interplay between domestic and international actors appears to be more of an enabler to progress in contexts with closed civic space or where political will at the highest levels of decision-making is absent or extremely limited.

- There is evidence that the following elements led to effective action:
- Diplomatic pressure and advocacy from both fellow states and multilateral institutions, often framed in human rights language, mechanisms and processes.
- International actors, including UN mechanisms, academics and international NGOs, sharing expertise, raising awareness of the issues, providing evidence and creating spaces for discussion.
- The international community funding civil society organisations engaged in reform processes.<sup>109</sup>

One of the most striking examples comes from **Iran**, where effective collaboration between national and international NGOs catalysed diplomatic pressure which resulted in an amendment to the Anti-Narcotics Law in 2017. Things started moving when Iranian civil society began compiling stories and evidence and sharing it with the international community. In collaboration with international NGOs, a spotlight was shone on UNODC and donor countries' potential complicity in drug executions in the country through their funding of anti-narcotic operations. This put executions and drug law enforcement in focus, and triggered advocacy from diplomatic missions, UN agencies and the EU. Eventually, this diplomatic pressure made domestic political debate inevitable, as national actors already sceptical of drug law enforcement felt emboldened to raise the issue. All of this, combined, raised the political (and financial) cost of executions, both domestically and internationally, and led to the adoption of the 2017 amendment.

In **Pakistan**, the EU is credited with playing a crucial role in reform through its Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP+), which removes import duties for countries adhering to certain international treaties, including on human rights. The EU regularly raised the issue of capital punishment with Pakistani authorities, noting that it was against GSP+ criteria, and it provided civil society with an open communication channel to provide information. Not by chance, the government announced a dense set of reforms shortly after the EU's 2020 GSP+ monitoring mission. Pakistan's eventual abolition of the death penalty for drug and other offences was partly aimed at enhancing the country's international standing.

109. A 2023 study by HRI and the World Coalition Against Death Penalty shows that funding to abolitionist organisations was key to developing an effective movement which achieved significant progress towards death penalty abolition both at international and country level. Domestically, funding by international institutional and private donors empowered local organisations to conduct research, and to campaign and advocate for law and policy reform, achieving significant progress and often leading the movement towards abolition.



In **Vietnam**, an expert interviewee connected death penalty legislation reform, including for drug-related offences, with recommendations made by international human rights agencies. These recommendations found fertile ground due to the country's desire to better integrate into the international community and the world economy. For this reason, the Universal Periodic Review may have had some influence in Vietnam, as has also been the case in **Thailand**.

Experts have hinted at how countries sometimes reform or abolish the death penalty for drug offences to 'send a message' to the international community on the health of the country's institutions. In **Nigeria**, for example, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the military leader who abolished the death penalty for drug offences, was reportedly more sensitive to international pressure than his predecessor. Abolition may have been a way for Babangida to signal to the international community his commitment to transition towards a more democratic system.

## 2. INCREMENTAL REFORMS

### Step-by-step: reforms as building blocks towards abolition

Another recurring feature of reform processes is the incremental nature of progress, which often consists of many small steps rather than a sudden and isolated, comprehensive change.

In **Malaysia**, restricting the use of the death penalty for drug offences was the result of several steps. First, a reform introduced limited judicial discretion in drug trafficking cases, next a judgment declared a double presumption of possession and of intent to traffic unconstitutional,<sup>110</sup> then a 2023 reform ended mandatory death penalty sentences for all crimes this had previously been prescribed for (including drug offences). Even this last development could be seen as another step towards, eventually, full abolition. Similarly, in **Türkiye** and **Uzbekistan**, repeal of the death penalty for drug offences was not an end in itself, but part of an incremental process that ended in full abolition of the death penalty for all crimes.

This incremental approach can also have a negative side; namely, by hardening a country's position at an intermediate step towards abolition without going the full way. Tinkering with some of the most problematic aspects of the death penalty for drug offences by focusing on technical amendments may give the impression that the issue has been addressed to an extent and that no further scrutiny is needed, while in practice

110. In Malaysia, the concept of double presumption relates to the fact that, according to Section 37 of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952, (a) anyone found with anything in their custody or control which contained illicit drugs is presumed to have been in possession of the drugs, and aware of their illicit nature, and (b) anyone found in possession of specified amounts of certain drugs is presumed to be trafficking such drugs, unless the contrary is proven. As a result, anyone found with a sufficient amount of drugs can be sentenced to death for drug trafficking without any further evidence linking them to the drugs.

the current level of reform has limited impact. This is the situation in **Singapore** where the 2012 reform did not go far enough but has so far acted as a barrier to further reform. Similarly, an expert concluded that **India's** decision to make the death penalty for drug offences discretionary rather than mandatory may have decreased the likelihood of its abolition, as it has created the perception that capital punishment is reserved for the most serious of drug offences and is therefore acceptable.

Proceeding through small tweaks may also result in limited impact, either because they are too minor to affect the practice, and/or because they fail to also address the underlying, systemic issues that shape the imposition of capital punishment in the first place. In **Vietnam**, despite significant restrictions to the list of drug offences punishable by death, some observers suggest the number of drug-related death sentences has not dropped and may have actually increased. A key reason is a failure to address wider issues connected to its application.

### **A broader picture: reforms as part of political or institutional processes**

Resort to the death penalty for drug offences does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, the death penalty is often expanded or restricted as part of, or in connection to, broader political or institutional developments. Death penalty abolition has been closely linked to processes of democratisation or institutional reform. This was the case in the **Philippines** in 1987, in **Taiwan** in 1992 and in **Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan**. In **Nigeria**, repeal of the death penalty for drug offences was directly connected to a change in regime. The peculiarity in this case is that the regime change was itself – at least in part – triggered by drug-related executions and the upheaval they provoked.

Conversely, the inherently political nature of drug control means many governments use punitive drug policies, or harmful narratives on drugs, as a tool of social control or for political purposes. This is the case in Iran where the regime uses executions, particularly for drug offences, as an instrument of control. Due to the unique stigma attached to drugs and the fact that most defendants are from poor and marginalised backgrounds, drug-related executions attract less condemnation, particularly from international actors. But on the flip side, efforts to expose this injustice helped drive the 2017 reform.

### 3. COMMON NARRATIVES

A closer look at debates on reforming the death penalty for drug offences reveals recurring arguments. Most are justifications in favour of restricting or abandoning the death penalty, some are arguments against reform, and others play a dual role.

#### **Deterrence**

The need to use the death penalty to deter drug use and trafficking, on one side, and its ineffectiveness as a deterrent, on the other, appear in virtually every debate in the countries analysed.

In some countries, the lack of deterrence was cited as a reason for reform. In Iran, a defining moment was the acknowledgment by several institutional actors at different levels, that punitive drug control - and the death penalty as its most extreme manifestation - does not deter drug use or sale. In other countries, the deterrence argument is used as a reason to support the death penalty or to reject more substantial reform, despite no evidence to back up these claims. The clearest example is **Singapore**, where the government's core message around the 2012 reform was that it would enhance the effectiveness of drug law enforcement by sharpening the tools at its disposal. To date, such effectiveness has not been proven.

#### **Proportionality and individualised judgment**

Many reforms have been justified by the need to enhance proportionality and promote more individualised approaches to sentencing which consider the diverse circumstances of the crime and the defendant. One of the main reasons behind this is a growing awareness that the death penalty for drug offences disproportionately and uniquely affects the poorest and most marginalised people in society, and in the drug market. In **Malaysia**, policymakers advocating for reform acknowledged that death sentences for drug offences are mainly imposed on people from marginalised and vulnerable backgrounds, some of whom were tricked or coerced into carrying drugs.

Proportionality emerges as an effective justification, particularly in relation to removing or reforming mandatory death sentences and in influencing judicial attitudes. In **Pakistan**, the issuing of sentencing guidelines contained in the judgement of the Ghulam Murtaza case found that a sentencing approach based only on substance quantity could lead to “unduly cruel and harsh” punishments. Similarly, in **India**, the judgment which ended mandatory death sentences for drug offences found this type of sentencing “completely takes away the judicial discretion, nay, abridges the entire procedure of administration of criminal justice of weighing the aggravating and mitigating circumstances in which the offence was committed as well as that of the offender”.

## Imperfect justice for an irreversible punishment

A growing awareness of the many fallacies of the criminal legal system, rooted in both human errors and structural issues, is another effective justification for limiting or removing the use of the death penalty for drug offences. In **Indonesia**, a key argument supporting reform was evidence of unfair trials and human rights violations surrounding the use of the death penalty and in the criminal legal system, particularly in relation to drug offences which are the main offence that people are sentenced to death for.

One of the most visible indicators of the fallibility of the criminal legal system is **inconsistency in the use of capital punishment**. This points to the arbitrary nature and lack of objectivity in relation to the death penalty, and/or to a failure to fully appreciate the circumstances of the crime and the defendant (or the impossibility of doing so, in the case of mandatory sentences). In **Malaysia**, inconsistent use of capital punishment and the risk of miscarriages of justice were identified as the primary justification for reform.

## Human rights and moral values

Promoting and protecting human rights is another recurring justification for pursuing reform. In some contexts, human rights seem to be understood mainly as descending from international obligations. In others, human rights are primarily referred to in relation to domestic standards. It is worth noting that, the reference to international human rights obligations as justification for reform is problematised by experts who question how genuine this is in some countries. This is particularly relevant where the death penalty has not been abolished but simply reformed in the name of human rights, yet people are still sentenced to death in violation of those same standards.

The language of human rights has been most explicit in countries undergoing a process of democratisation and state-building, part of which sees them aim for better integration within the international community, as was the case in **Tajikistan**, **Turkmenistan** and **Uzbekistan**. In **Mauritius**, a key reason identified for moving towards abolition was the country's increasing awareness and sensitivity towards human rights and the implication of this for the death penalty.

Justifications against the death penalty can also be rooted in morality and values, such as the inherent value of life or religious beliefs. This was perhaps most notable in the Philippines, a country where most of the population holds strong religious beliefs. Catholic leaders and organisations were key members of the country's Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and capital punishment was presented as being against what a member of Congress described as "the ultimate right of a person to live..."; President Macapagal Arroyo's pursuit of abolition was presented as being guided by her religious values and "moral compass".

## The public opinion narrative

Public opinion is identified as a recurring narrative, both in support for and against reform.

In **Nigeria**, pressure and protests by the public in relation to the death penalty and how it was imposed against people convicted of drug trafficking significantly contributed to regime change and, in turn, abolition of the death penalty for drug offences. In contrast, in **Thailand** public opinion was identified as a key reason why the government would not consider abolishing the death penalty, with support for the ‘war on drugs’ cited as an influencing factor. In **Taiwan**, an expert interviewee noted how public support for the death penalty, and for what is perceived as a ‘strong’ response to crime, is one of the main reasons why reform is unlikely to happen through a legislative process and will make the courts a more suitable avenue for change.

## 4. TRANSPARENCY AND AWARENESS-RAISING

Essential in any process towards death penalty reform is monitoring and collecting information, then sharing it with the public and institutional stakeholders. This requires transparency on capital punishment, which is too often absent in retentionist countries. Access to previously unavailable information is often identified as a turning point, coupled with effective communication and education.

In **Iran**, the lack of information on death sentences and executions, held both inside and outside the country, was identified as a stumbling block for activists. The ability to access information from inside the country, enabled by political prisoners, and the decision to gather and share that information, showing patterns and connecting individual stories to systemic issues, spurred action both domestically and internationally, eventually pushing decision-makers to take action.

Interestingly, in Iran and elsewhere, the availability of information is not only key in pathways towards reform, but in some cases it is also enhanced by reform itself. The 2017 amendment to Iran’s Anti-Narcotics Law, and all the debate that preceded it, acted as a catalyst for information sharing on capital punishment and drug control. It also made affected groups more aware of international standards and human rights principles.

Increased awareness of the background of people facing death sentences for drugs, and of drug-related issues more generally, is also credited with highlighting how these sentences predominantly affect people who are poor and marginalised. In **Singapore**, there was little information on the use of the death penalty before the 2012

amendment, which made it difficult to make progress on reform. In time, civil society and people on death row started gathering and releasing more information. This, together with the case of Yong Vui Kong (see below), gradually led to more sustained criticism of systemic failures. Once passed, the 2012 amendment was credited with more information being available, particularly on the people facing death sentences and on due process concerns, which in turn spearheaded more activism. Indeed, among the unintended consequences of the amendment are attempts by defence lawyers to more fully describe the context in which defendants were driven to engage in the drug market – often pointing to poverty, financial hardship or a history of drug use.

Some individual cases seem to embody the many shortcomings of both capital punishment and punitive drug control and are able to convey this to the public and to influential stakeholders in a uniquely effective way.

What moved the needle in **Nigeria** was the barbaric, public execution of three people sentenced to death for drug trafficking in blatant violation of due process standards. Similarly, in 2010 the case of Yong Vui Kong – a Malaysian teenager from a poor background who was sentenced to the mandatory death penalty in Singapore for acting as a drug courier as a way out of poverty – catalysed activism and change both in **Malaysia** and **Singapore**. In Malaysia, Kong's plight became a recurring topic in public debate thanks to regular media coverage driven by local civil society, which pressured both the executive, parliament, and even the King to react. While not officially acknowledged, it is widely believed that this also informed the Singapore government's decision to enact the 2012 reform – Kong entirely fit the criteria for the new discretionary death penalty, and he was the first person to have their death sentence commuted following the reform's adoption. In **Indonesia**, the case of Merri Utami, a woman from a poor background who was tricked into unknowingly carrying drugs across borders and spent nearly two decades on death row, came up repeatedly in debates preceding the Criminal Code reform, to exemplify the way that many people are tricked or coerced into trafficking drugs.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## To abolitionist advocates:

- Form inclusive and diverse coalitions, and connect with broader movements working towards structural change, rights-centred policies and strong and open democracies.
- Ensure calls for reform are locally driven and led, context-sensitive and context-responsive, and rooted in a deep understanding of relevant stakeholders, recurring narratives, and influencing social, economic and political factors.
- Advocate for transparency and access to information as part of this – one cannot change what is not known.
- Map and review all actors that may be involved in or influence policymaking, including institutional actors but also civil society, academia, international and multilateral institutions, religious leaders, businesses and other private actors. If feasible and safe, focus on sensitising and constructively engaging all relevant stakeholders, based on individualised assessments.
- Promote structural change, including by collaborating with organisations and activists working on connected issues. This can help avoid the limitations of technical, piecemeal reforms and address underlying issues. Broader attention on structural change is needed in relation to:
  - strengthening democracies and civic space, which is also key to enhancing transparency and due process safeguards
  - drug policy reform: any debate or initiative aimed at reducing the use of the death penalty must incorporate a critical assessment and reform of drug control away from punitive approaches and towards policies that promote dignity, health and rights.
- Develop effective and inclusive strategies and networks for cross-country coordination, collaboration and experience-sharing. This will help the sharing of best practices, and build a solid base for joint advocacy both on individual cases and reform opportunities.
- Advocate for full transparency from retentionist countries on their use of the death penalty. Governments should collect and regularly publish accurate figures on death sentences, the death row population, executions, clemency and commutations; disaggregated by category of offence, gender, age, nationality, race and socio-economic status.

- Identify and analyse recurring narratives supporting the use of the death penalty and punitive drug control, both for institutional actors and public opinion, then craft effective, evidence-based counter-arguments.

### **To abolitionist governments and multilateral actors:**

- Support and fund domestic civil society and civic space to empower local actors to lead abolitionist efforts and ensure people with lived experiences are meaningfully and safely engaged.
- Promote the meaningful participation of civil society, experts and affected groups in the design and monitoring of drug laws and policies and the imposition of capital punishment. Reform processes should be duly monitored and documented to share best practices, limitations and lessons learned.
- Ensure no funding or other support is given to anti-narcotic operations in retentionist countries (including through the provision of technical assistance, capacity building and equipment) as this risks contributing to the use of the death penalty. Any such support should be immediately suspended if this risk arises. To this end:
  - Abolition of the death penalty, or at least a moratorium on it, should be a precondition for the provision of aid or other support to drug control programmes.
  - Civil society should be meaningfully involved in the design, monitoring and evaluation of cooperation and funding agreements on anti-narcotics operations.



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2024