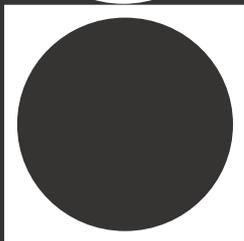
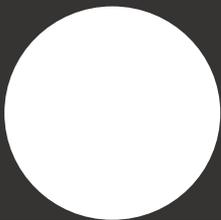


THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES:

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

2025



**The Death Penalty for Drug Offences:
Global Overview 2025**

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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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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 offences¹ worldwide since our first ground-breaking publication on this issue in 2007. This report, our 15th 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,² a practice which is a clear violation of international human rights and drug control standards.

This year's report includes key data and updated categories as well as significant international and national developments that took place throughout 2025. A deeper analysis of developments and trends will be published in the 2026 edition and on alternate years. The methodology used for all reports remains the same.³

HRI opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception.

1. 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 which are not related to the trafficking, possession or use of controlled substances and related inchoate offences (inciting, assisting or abetting a crime). HRI's research also excludes countries where drug offences are punishable by death only if they involve, or result in, intentional killing.
2. 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, available upon request.
3. For a complete description of HRI's methodology please see Giada Cirelli, Marcela Jofré, and Ajeng Larasati, 'The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024' (London: Harm Reduction International, 2025). Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/HRI-GlobalOverview-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

CATEGORIES

To demonstrate the differences between law and practice among states where the death penalty can be imposed for drug offences, HRI categorises countries into 'high application', 'low application' and 'symbolic application' states.

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

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 were imposed during that period, yet the confirmed number of drug-related death sentences does not meet the threshold required for high application classification. Egypt, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and Yemen are low application countries confirmed to have carried out executions in 2025, but not for drug offences. The section below, therefore, only provides figures on death sentences and death row populations.⁴

Symbolic Application States are those that have laws which allow the death penalty for drug offences but have not carried out executions nor sentenced individuals to death for drug offences in the past five years. South Sudan, Taiwan and the United States of America (USA) are symbolic application countries confirmed to have carried out executions in 2025, but not for drug offences.

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

4. HRI acknowledges 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 may include figures collected by countries and organisations according to different criteria.

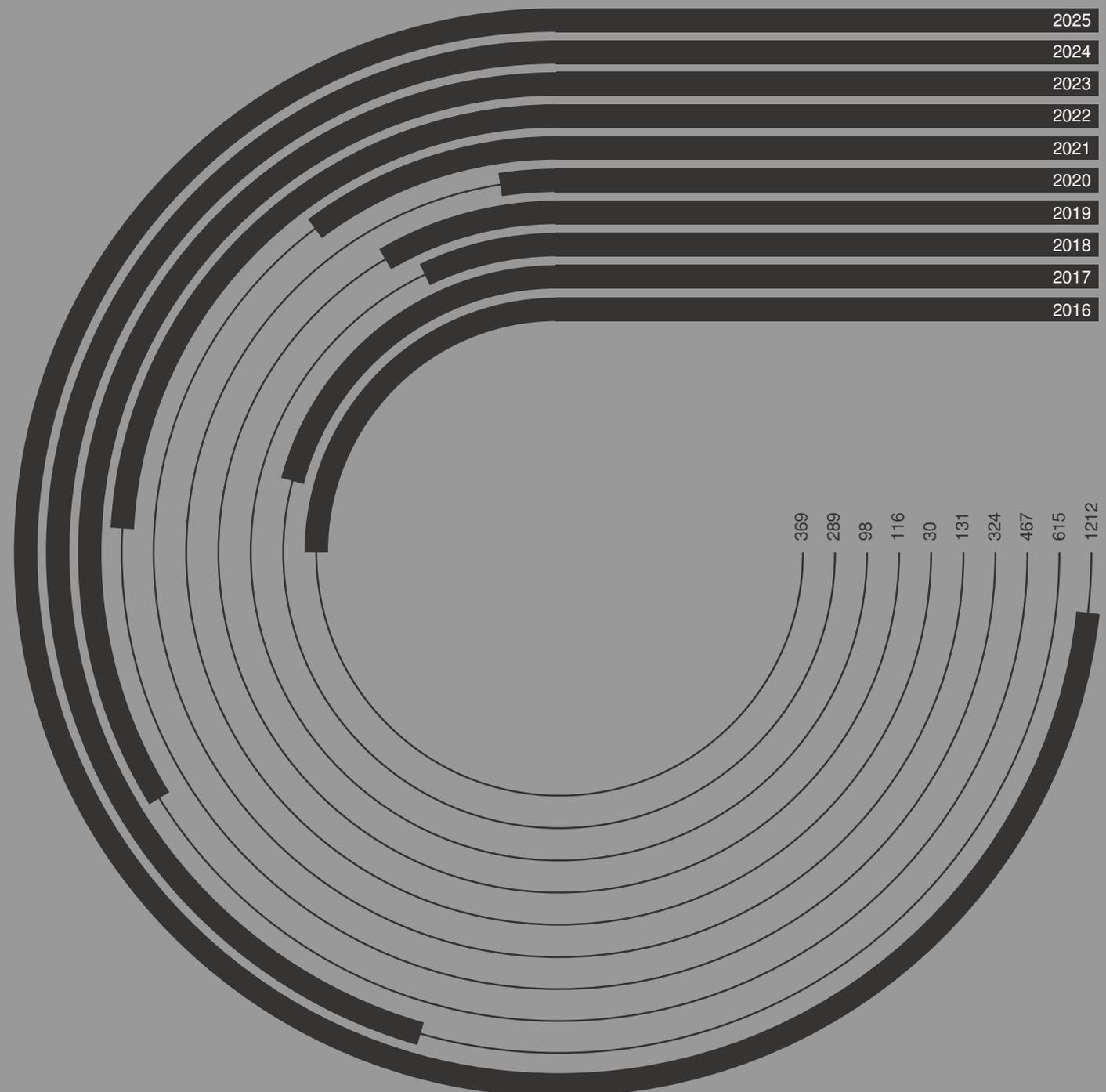
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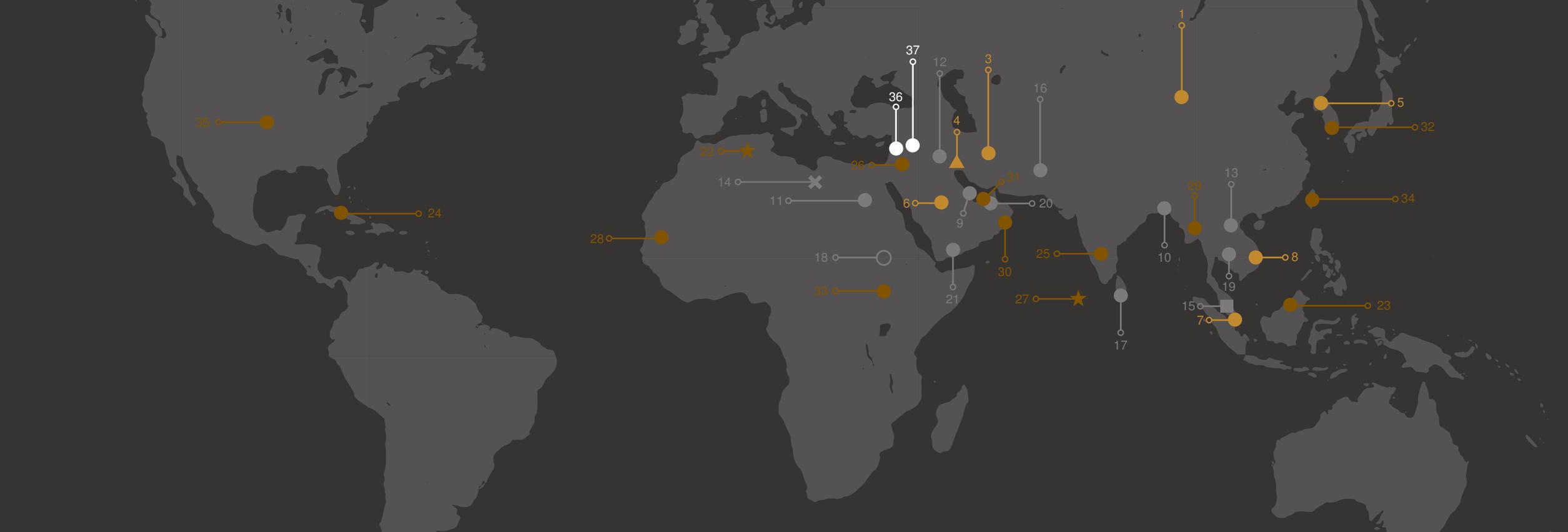
2025 IN A SNAPSHOT

MINIMUM CONFIRMED EXECUTIONS FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2016-2025)

- At least 1,212 people were **executed for drug offences** worldwide (excluding figures from China, Vietnam and North Korea). This represents a 97% increase from 2024, and the highest figure reported since HRI started monitoring drug-related executions in 2007.
- Drug offences were responsible for **over 46% of all executions confirmed globally**.
- Drug-related **executions increased by 97% between 2024 and 2025 in both Iran and Saudi Arabia**. Foreign nationals and people from ethnic minorities remain overrepresented among those executed.
- Drug-related **executions were confirmed in five countries** (China, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Singapore). Executions are assumed to have been carried out in North Korea and Vietnam, but state secrecy and censorship prevent a minimum figure from being confirmed.
- Two countries (Algeria and the Maldives) amended their laws to **introduce the death penalty for certain drug offences**. For the first time in over a decade, the number of countries retaining the death penalty for drug offences increased – up to a total of 36.
- **331 death sentences for drug offences** were confirmed in 18 countries – one country more than in 2024.
- At least **2,450 people** (likely hundreds more) **are on death row** for drug offences in 22 countries.
- Confirmed figures are likely a gross underestimate of the actual number of drug-related executions and death sentences. This is due to a **persistent lack of transparency**, and censorship on information about the use of the death penalty.



COUNTRY BY COUNTRY



High Application

- China
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Kuwait
- North Korea (DPRK)
- Saudi Arabia
- Singapore
- Vietnam

Low Application

- Bahrain
- Bangladesh
- Egypt
- Iraq
- Lao PDR
- Libya
- Malaysia
- Pakistan⁵
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Thailand
- United Arab Emirates
- Yemen

Symbolic Application

- Algeria
- Brunei Darussalam
- Cuba
- India
- Jordan
- Maldives
- Mauritania
- Myanmar
- Oman
- Qatar
- South Korea
- South Sudan
- Taiwan
- United States of America

Insufficient Data

- State of Palestine (Gaza)
- Syria

Added in 2025 ★

Moved from High Application to Low Application ◼

Moved from Low Application to High Application ▲

Moved from Symbolic Application to Low Application ○

Moved from Insufficient Data to Low Application ✕

⁵Pakistan removed death as a possible sentence for drug offences in 2023. It remains included in this report because people on death row for drug offences were reported in 2025.

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

The year 2025 was an exceptionally brutal one for global drug control. A record number of drug-related executions in a small but resolute group of countries translated into the **highest number of executions ever recorded globally** since HRI started reporting on drug-related executions in 2007. At least 1,212 people were executed due to a drug offence.

These are likely to **only be a fraction of all drug-related executions carried out in 2025**, as China, North Korea and Vietnam continue operating in secrecy.

In fact, most of the information contained in this report would remain inaccessible, if not for the efforts of civil society and people directly affected by the death penalty who continue essential monitoring work despite shrinking civic space and dwindling funding in many countries.⁶

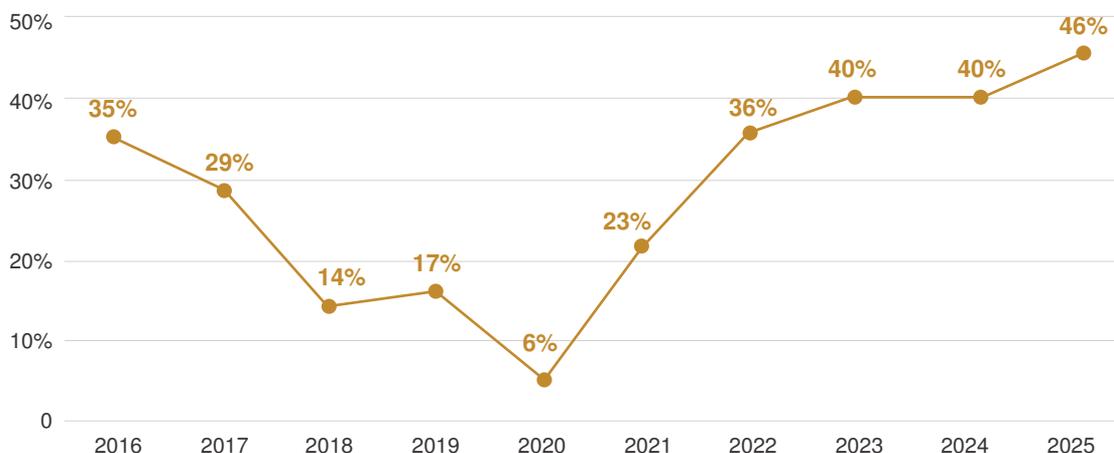
Known **drug-related executions increased by 97% between 2024 and 2025**. The spike mainly stems from sharp rises in Iran, where executions have become a central tool of repression amid intensifying protests, and Saudi Arabia which has recently escalated its ‘war on drugs’. Singapore and Kuwait also contributed to the increase, to a lesser degree.

While partial, these figures confirm a now-established trend: **punitive drug control is a key driver of use of the death penalty** worldwide. Drug-related executions account for over 46% of all executions confirmed globally (almost one in two), and in several countries drug offences are the main crimes for which people are sentenced to death or on death row. This is despite little evidence that using the death penalty reduces drug use and drug crimes – the stated objective of this measure. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) 2025 World Drug Report describes an agile and thriving global drug market, with a reported increase in drug use, a seemingly unstoppable expansion of the synthetic drug market, new substances being developed – some more potent and deadly than ever – and a ‘record-breaking year’ for the global cocaine market. Asia and the Middle East, where most retentionist countries for drug offences are located, remain trafficking hotspots, and South-East Asia continues to be the largest and most active methamphetamine market in the world.⁷

6. Arielle McHenry et al., ‘Achieving Abolition: Funding the Anti-Death Penalty Movement’ (London: Harm Reduction International and World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, 2023). Available from https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/HRI_DP-abolition-funding-1.pdf.

7. UNODC, ‘World Drug Report 2025: Key Findings’ (Vienna: UNODC, 2025). Available from www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/WDR_2025/WDR25_B1_Key_findings.pdf.

PERCENTAGE OF KNOWN GLOBAL EXECUTIONS COMMITTED FOR DRUG OFFENCES (2016-2025)



Among the people executed for drug offences worldwide in 2025, at least 23 were **women**, 338 were reportedly from **ethnic minorities** (almost one in four people executed), and 271 were **foreign nationals** (more than one in five people executed). Many of the people executed share similar stories: a background of poverty, due process flaws, and a low-level position in the drug trade, meaning they are highly visible to law enforcement yet easily replaceable in the drug market.

Throughout 2025, at least **331 people were sentenced to death** for drug crimes in 18 countries (one more country than in 2024). Among them were at least 7 women and 33 foreign nationals. Over 2,450 people remain on death row for drug offences in 22 countries; hundreds of these people are at risk of imminent execution.

The long-standing failure of the international community to hold governments accountable for this inhumane, illegal and ineffective practice, combined with populist rhetorics that frame drugs as an existential security threat, had grave consequences in 2025. There were not only a staggering number of executions, and stark increases in death sentences in countries such as Iraq and Indonesia; **rare punitive legal reforms were also enacted. For the first time in over a decade, two countries – Algeria and the Maldives – introduced the death penalty for drug offences.** These developments run counter to countries' international obligation to progressively restrict the use of the death penalty and go against the well-established global trend towards universal abolition of the death penalty.

We are witnessing a further intensification in ‘war on drugs’ rhetoric in many countries and globally, perhaps best exemplified by the extrajudicial killings carried out by the USA in international waters under the pretext of fighting ‘narcoterrorism’.⁸ This escalation is happening in an international drug policy landscape shaped by structural power imbalances, with high-income countries (such as the USA) exerting disproportionate influence on lower-income countries’ drug laws and policies, financing and law enforcement. Rather than alleviating harms, this neo-colonial dynamic is reproducing colonial-era hierarchies, perpetuating harms and channelling resources into ineffective, punitive law enforcement and away from proven rights-based and health-centred approaches.⁹

If these narratives continue to gain traction, there is a **serious risk that extreme responses such as the death penalty will be further normalised as a tool of drug control.**

This is not a sudden crisis. It is a long-forewarned escalation of a trend that began in 2021, one that international actors have tolerated. A handful of voices – mostly the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UN human rights experts, the European Union and a few countries – have condemned executions and recommended moratoria,¹⁰ but many others have stayed silent. As a consequence, executing countries face little to no accountability. Most striking is the absence of any public engagement by UNODC, which not only has failed to take any public stance on the issue, but is actively supporting anti-narcotics programmes in executing countries, including Iran.

The crisis we face requires bold and decisive action. Further silence, hesitation or delay in confronting the use of the death penalty as a tool of drug control risks being interpreted not merely as indifference, but as acceptance – if not complicity. No government can honestly claim to be promoting the ‘health and welfare of humankind’ – the main objective of global drug control – by killing its people. An urgent and critical reconsideration of the current punitive approach, and the profound human, legal and social harms it causes, is urgently needed to achieve more effective and humane drug policies, and ultimately move towards global abolition of the death penalty.

8. OHCHR, ‘US War on “narco-terrorists” violates the right to life, warn UN experts after deadly vessel strike’ (Geneva: OHCHR, 16 September 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/us-war-narco-terrorists-violates-right-life-warn-un-experts-after-deadly.
9. Colleen Daniels et al., ‘Neo-colonialism and financing for the war on drugs: a review of current policy and recommendations for countries in the global north’, *Harm Reduction Journal* 22:170 (17 October 2025). Available from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12954-025-01243-7>. See also Claire Provost, ‘A World of Harm: How U.S taxpayers fund the global war on drugs over evidence-based health responses’ (New York: Drug Policy Alliance and Harm Reduction International, 2024). Available from https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/A-World-of-Harm-Report-FINAL-11_25.pdf.
10. Among others: OHCHR, ‘Iran: Call to halt increasing executions and impose moratorium on death penalty’ (Geneva: OHCHR, 29 August 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2025/08/iran-call-halt-increasing-executions-and-impose-moratorium-death. EEAS, ‘Joint Local Statement following executions on 5 and 7 February 2025’ (Singapore: EEAS, 10 February 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/singapore/joint-local-statement-following-executions-5-and-7-february-2025_en.

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) | |
|--------------------|---|------------|--|------------|--|-----------------|
| | 2025 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 |
| China | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | unknown |
| Indonesia | 0 (-) | 0 (-) | 143 (87%) | 75 (88%) | 400+(65%) | 360 (63%) |
| Iran | 955+ (46%) | 485+ (52%) | Unknown | Unknown | 1000+ (unknown) | 1000+ (unknown) |
| Kuwait | 2 (12%) | 0 (-) | 4+ (40%) | 3+ (43%) | 14+ (45%) | 12+ (40%) |
| North Korea (DPRK) | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | unknown |
| Saudi Arabia | 240 (67%) | 122 (35%) | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown | Unknown |
| Singapore | 15 (88%) | 8 (89%) | 2 (100%) | 5 (100%) | 36 (95%) | 48 (96%) |
| Vietnam | Unknown | Unknown | 85+ (89%) | 113+ (73%) | Unknown | Unknown |

LOW APPLICATION STATES

| Country | Death sentences for drug offences (% of total) | | People on death row for drug offences (% of total) | |
|------------------------|---|------------|---|----------------|
| | 2025 | 2024 | 2025 | 2024 |
| Bahrain | 0 (-) | 0 (-) | 4+ (15%) | 4+ (15%) |
| Bangladesh | 4 (2%) | 3+ (1%) | 14+ (0.7%) | 10+ (0.4%) |
| Egypt | 7+ (1.4%) | 10+ (2%) | unknown | unknown |
| Iraq | 40+ (42%) | 144+ (68%) | 150+ (2%) | 200+ (2.5%) |
| Lao PDR | 8+ (89%) | 2+ (100%) | 280+ (89%) | 300+ (unknown) |
| Libya | 1+ (12%) | 0 (-) | 1+ (4%) | 1+ (unknown) |
| Malaysia | 9+ (69%) | 10+ (42%) | 21+ (21%) | 10+ (10%) |
| Pakistan ¹¹ | 0 (-) | 3 (2.5%) | 7 (0.3%) | 20 (0.5%) |
| Sri Lanka | 10+ (26%) | 1+ (1%) | 80+ (10%) | 88+ (7%) |
| Sudan | 1+ (0.8%) | 0 (-) | 1+ (0.7%) | 0 (-) |
| Thailand | Unknown | Unknown | 304 (72%) | 232 (67%) |
| United Arab Emirates | 0 (-) | 0 (-) | 3+ (11%) | 4+ (27%) |
| Yemen | 17+ (39%) | 13+ (8%) | 30+ (30%) | 20+ (12%) |

11. Pakistan removed death as a possible punishment for drug offences in 2023. It remains included in this report because people on death row for drug offences were reported in 2025.

KEY NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

EXECUTIONS FOR DRUG OFFENCES

There was a stark increase in drug-related executions in several countries in 2025. In Iran, Saudi Arabia and Singapore drug-related executions reached the highest number ever recorded since HRI started reporting on the issue in 2007.

Iran alone was responsible for at least 955 executions – an average of nearly 3 people a day – with peaks of 125 and 136 executions in November and December. Iran’s drug-related executions left as least 222 children without a parent in 2025.

Executions for all crimes have been consistently increasing since 2021 in Iran, in parallel with growing protests, socio-economic instability and state repression, all of which escalated further in 2025. As the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre on Human Rights in Iran observed:

What is going on behind the closed doors of Iran’s prisons, summary, and arbitrary executions, whose details are deliberately hidden from the public, is nothing short of mass killings... These are not acts of justice or crime prevention but the desperate violence of a state that has lost the consent of its people.¹²

People from ethnic minorities continue to be disproportionately represented among those executed. According to civil society reports and HRI’s monitoring, people from ethnic minorities accounted for 35% (336) of all those executed for drug offences in 2025 in Iran. A third of these people were reportedly Baluchis, an ethnic group which make up 2% of Iran’s population¹³ and is historically marginalised and overrepresented on death row.¹⁴ At least 73 foreign nationals were executed for drug crimes, of which 70 were Afghan nationals. A record number of women (20) was also executed for drug crimes. Several of the women executed had been reportedly arrested with their partners (at least two were executed jointly with their husbands), or after drugs were found in family’s properties rather than in their direct possession, raising concerns about the role the women played in the offences.

12. Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre for Human Rights in Iran, ‘Forgotten Behind Closed Doors’, (Washington DC: ABC, 10 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.iranrights.org/newsletter/issue/164.

13. Alia Chughtai and Mohamed A. Hussein, ‘A simple visual guide to Iran and its people’ (Doha: Al Jazeera, 20 June 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/20/a-simple-visual-guide-to-iran-and-its-people.

14. Other people reported as belonging to ethnic minorities that were recorded as being executed for drug offences in 2025 were: Kurdish (91+), Turkic (53+), Lor (41+), Gilak (25+), Arab (9+), Other/unknown (7+).

SPOTLIGHT 1: IRAN'S WAR ON PEOPLE

Iran's intensified war on drugs has disproportionately impacted marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, people from disadvantaged backgrounds and foreign nationals. Many of these people endured trials riddled with severe rights violations. Most drug-related executions in Iran are not officially announced. In at least 65 cases, executions were carried out in secret (with no prior notice), while in 6 other cases families were notified but denied a final visit, depriving the person on death row and their loved ones of their right to visitation.

As Iran Human Rights reports, people with the least power to defend themselves are disproportionately impacted by the death penalty, especially those who live in poverty, face discrimination or are pushed to society's margins. For instance, a Kurdish municipal worker who was executed on 25 September 2025, reportedly came from a poor family and could not afford a lawyer of his choice.¹⁵ There is also evidence that, over time, multiple members of the same family or community have been sentenced to death or executed for drug offences.¹⁶ One such case reported by Iran Human Rights is that of Chah Kheyr, a small village in Lorestan, which is home to the Lak ethnic minority group and has only 544 inhabitants. Between 2010 and 2025, at least 70 people from Chah Kheyr were executed, of which at least 27 were executed for drug offences, while 100 more remain on death row for drug offences.

Throughout 2025, civil society has denounced various cases in which executions were carried out before the individual had gone through the full appeals process or when they had a judicial review pending. This is in violation of core fair-trial rights. For example, a Baluch man was executed on 4 August 2025 despite his case being under review and a new supervisory hearing approaching. His execution was carried out without prior notice, depriving him of a last family visit.¹⁷ Similarly, a Kurdish man was executed in secrecy on 7 September 2025 despite a judicial review of disputed elements in his case being underway, with a further hearing scheduled for 3 November 2025.¹⁸ Another Baluch man, who was initially sentenced to 20 years in prison for a drug offence, was executed on 9 February 2025 after his sentence was changed to the death penalty for undisclosed reasons.¹⁹

15. Hengaw, 'Keyvan Mohammadi from Dehghan executed in Zanjan' (Norway: Hengaw, 4 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://hengaw.net/en/news/2025/10/article-18>.

16. Iran Human Rights, 'A Village of Graves: Widespread and Systematic Drug Executions in Iran' (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 2025). Available from https://iranhr.net/media/files/A_Village_of_Graves.pdf.

17. Hengaw, 'Baluch prisoner Davood Lajai executed in Mashhad despite pending case review' (Norway: Hengaw, 9 August 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://hengaw.net/en/news/2025/08/article-38>.

18. Iran Human Rights, 'Najib Azaram Executed in Group Hanging of 7 in Tabriz' (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 8 September 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/7982/>.

19. Ahmad Azizi, 'Iran executes Afghan national on drug charges, rights group says' (United States: AMU, 9 February 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://amu.tv/156572/>.

Iran's Islamic Penal Code allows *elm-e-qazi* (knowledge of the judge) as an admissible basis for establishing guilt in the absence of a confession or witness testimonies, based on other available evidence, including circumstantial evidence. However, Iran Human Rights has reported cases in which *elm-e-qazi* has been arbitrarily applied. For example, three men were sentenced to death in a joint case where no drugs or other evidence were found. They were all executed on 9 September 2025.²⁰

Other documented human rights violations include confessions extracted through coercion and torture, systematic denial of effective legal counsel and Revolutionary Court judges issuing death sentences without evidence.²¹ All these instances breach Iran's international obligations and its own laws.

Saudi Arabia also carried out the country's highest number of drug-related executions on record, with 240 people killed in 2025. This spike has been attributed to the Kingdom's renewed war on drugs, coupled with a lack of international pressure.²² A mere five years after the government announced a moratorium on drug-related executions,²³ two in three people executed in Saudi Arabia had been convicted of drug offences. Of these, a staggering 188 were foreign nationals, including 2 women (both from Nigeria). At least 1 person was executed for mere drug possession, and 101 people for crimes related to cannabis.

20. Iran Human Rights, 'A Village of Graves: Widespread and Systematic Drug Executions in Iran' (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 2025). Available from https://iranhr.net/media/files/A_Village_of_Graves.pdf.

21. *Ibid.*

22. AFP, 'Executions in Saudi Arabia hit highest number on record in 2025' (London: The Guardian, 1 January 2026) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/01/executions-saudi-arabia-highest-number-ever-2025.

23. BBC, 'Saudi Arabia executions: 'Drastic' reduction reported in 2020' (London: BBC, 18 January 2021) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55710005.

SPOTLIGHT 2: DRUG-RELATED EXECUTIONS AND FOREIGN NATIONALS IN SAUDI ARABIA

The abrupt end of a brief moratorium on drug-related executions in 2022 sparked a sharp rise in state-sanctioned killings which disproportionately impacted some of society's most vulnerable: foreign nationals, migrants and suspected victims of human trafficking.

Reports by ALQST for Human Rights, Amnesty International, the European Saudi Organisation on Human Rights (ESOHR), and Reprieve,²⁴ as well as HRI's monitoring, reveals that 78% of drug-related executions in 2025 were of foreign nationals, including 39 Somalis, 35 Pakistanis, 35 Ethiopians, 22 Egyptians, 17 Afghans, 11 Jordanians, 10 Nigerians, 7 Syrians, 6 Iranians, 4 Sudanese and 1 Indian. This is the first time in at least a decade that Somali and Iranian nationals were executed for drug offences in Saudi Arabia, suggesting a possible shift in trafficking routes or law enforcement focus.

Civil society has documented recurring due process violations in cases against foreign nationals, despite Saudi Arabia's international obligation for enhanced safeguards. Discriminatory practices, coercion, torture-extracted confessions, language barriers and a lack of legal representation have all been reported in connection to death penalty cases involving foreign nationals. As of June 2025 there were at least 26 Egyptian nationals on death row for drug offences. Reprieve confirmed that seven of its clients on death row were later executed, despite enduring unfair trials and short-lived halts in executions followed by sudden killings. Their families were given no prior notice of executions and could not access the remains of their loved ones. Two of the individuals executed reportedly endured fair-trial violations, torture to coerce confessions and lack of access to adequate defence. In December 2025, a suspected human trafficking victim, who reported being coerced into smuggling drugs from Egypt's coast to Saudi Arabia after being shot during the journey, was executed. Prior to his execution, he was diagnosed with clinical depression and reported suicidal thoughts.²⁵

24. Among others: Katherine Hearst and Heba Nasser, "We live in terror": Egyptians in Saudi Arabia await imminent execution' (London: Middle East Eye, 25 July 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.middleeasteye.net/news/families-agonny-seven-egyptian-men-await-imminent-execution-saudi. Amnesty International, "If we had money and a lawyer, maybe my brother would be alive": Saudi Arabia's Execution Crisis' (London: Amnesty International, 2025). Available from www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde23/9524/2025/en/.

25. Reprieve, ALQST and ESOHR, "No one will be spared": The one promise Saudi Authorities kept: the death penalty in 2025: 356 executions' (London: Reprieve, 2026).

An unprecedented number of drug-related executions was also recorded in **Singapore**, where the government continues affirming the effectiveness of the death penalty in reducing drug use and crime.²⁶ Fifteen people, five of whom were Malaysian nationals, were hanged for drug offences, including the last woman on death row in the country. Among them was Pannir Selvam, whose case received significant attention, both domestically and internationally, due to perceived violations of due process rights and potential gaps in the investigation. Malaysian lawmakers asked for the execution to be halted pending further investigations,²⁷ and the UN Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial summary or arbitrary executions concluded that executing Selvam would amount to an ‘arbitrary deprivation of life’.²⁸

Selvam’s execution came just a few days after that of Datchinamurthy Kataiah – a fellow Malaysian who had spent 14 years on death row. Datchinamurthy’s family were informed his execution had been halted, but just a few hours later they were told that the execution would proceed and were asked to collect his body in less than two hours.²⁹ The last Malaysian national executed in 2025 was Saminathan Selvaraju, who had been convicted based on the testimony of his co-defendants and handwriting analysis, despite always maintaining his innocence.

On 11 September 2025, two Iranian nationals were executed for drug trafficking in **Kuwait**. The country appears to have intensified its war on drugs by strongly relying on capital punishment as a tool of drug control. Kuwait’s acting Prime Minister also indicated the government’s resolve to fix a ‘backlog of death row cases’ by speeding up executions,³⁰ raising concerns for the roughly 30 people currently on death row, 40% of whom are incarcerated for drug offences.

China, North Korea and Vietnam continued to impose capital punishment behind a veil of secrecy. This prevented any realistic figures from these countries being reported, and it means the unprecedented number of people executed globally in 2025 is likely to be far higher. In China, where the death penalty is perceived as an indispensable feature

26. Gabrielle Andres, ‘Public interest must come before personal beliefs: Shanmugam on the death penalty’ (Singapore: The Straits Times, 19 January 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.straitstimes.com/singapore/public-interest-must-come-before-personal-beliefs-shanmugam-on-the-death-penalty.
27. Malaysiakini, ‘Ramkarpal: Halt Pannir’s execution, he’s key witness in drug probe’ (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysiakini, 4 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://m.malaysiakini.com/news/757049>.
28. OHCHR, ‘UN expert urges Singapore to halt planned execution of Malaysian national for drug offence, warns it would amount to arbitrary deprivation of life’ (Geneva: OHCHR, 7 October 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/un-expert-urges-singapore-halt-planned-execution-malaysian-national-drug.
29. Free Malaysia Today, ‘Singapore executes Malaysian K Datchinamurthy’ (Kuala Lumpur: Free Malaysia Today, 25 September 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/09/25/spore-to-execute-datchinamurthy-family-told-to-collect-body-at-3pm.
30. Passant Hisham, ‘Drugs, citizenship forgery ‘the gravest threats facing Kuwait’ (Kuwait: Kuwait Times, 11 December 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://kuwaittimes.com/article/37020/kuwait/drugs-citizenship-forgery-the-gravest-threats-facing-kuwait/>.
31. SPP, ‘最高人民检察院“高效”好毒品案件 加强禁毒“综合治理”典型案例’ (Beijing: The Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the Republic of China, 25 June 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.spp.gov.cn/xwfbh/wsfbh/202506/t20250625_699204.shtml.
32. Koh Ewe, ‘China executed four Canadians for drug crimes, says Ottawa’ (London: BBC, 20 March 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.bbc.com/news/articles/c204ywy4kvo.
33. Lee et al., ‘White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2024’ (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Unification, 2025); Human Rights Council, ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights’, UN Doc A/HRC/60/58 (Geneva: UNHRC, 4 September 2025).

of drug control policy,³¹ four Canadian citizens were executed for drug trafficking.³² Defectors from North Korea consistently report an increase in (drug-related) executions, despite the apparent failure of these sentences to reduce drug use and manufacturing in the country.³³

Executions were regularly opposed and condemned by a range of international actors, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights,³⁴ UN Special Procedures,³⁵ the European Union and some states.³⁶ But these statements did not lead to more substantive action and had little impact.

DRUG-RELATED DEATH SENTENCES AND DEATH ROW POPULATIONS

Around the world, the confirmed number of people given drug-related death sentences and the size of death row populations remained fairly stable between 2024 and 2025, but this is likely due to a lack of transparency on capital punishment. With significant gaps in official reporting, known figures represent a mere fraction of those awaiting capital punishment for drug crimes worldwide.

This transparency gap is apparent in **Iraq**. While official sources reported 40 drug-related death sentences throughout 2025 (a fifth for cannabis-related crimes), in November 2025 Iraq's Ministry of Interior stated that 300 death sentences were imposed for drug crimes in the past three years, against seven imposed in the three years prior to that.³⁷ If accurate, this would not only confirm an intensification of the domestic war on drugs – featuring the death penalty as a central tool – but also imply around 100 death sentences for which no public record can be found.³⁸

The country with the most notable increase in drug-related death sentences is **Indonesia**, where a 93% jump was recorded between 2024 and 2025 (from 74 to 143). Among the people sentenced to death in 2025, six are foreign nationals (three Indians, two Malaysians and one Iranian). In nine cases, the District Court had originally imposed a lighter sentence (either to life imprisonment or 20 years of imprisonment), but prosecutors appealed against the sentences to seek the death penalty. The move to appeal in these cases follows the Attorney General Office's internal regulation which requires prosecutors to appeal any judgement that is at least two-thirds lower than what

34. For example: OHCHR, 'Türk calls on Iran to halt use of death penalty amid worrying surge in executions' (Geneva: OHCHR, 28 July 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/07/turk-calls-iran-halt-use-death-penalty-amid-worrying-surge-executions.

35. Among others: OHCHR, 'UN experts appalled by unprecedented execution spree in Iran with over 1000 killed in nine months' (Geneva: OHCHR, 29 September 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/un-experts-appalled-unprecedented-execution-spre-iran-over-1000-killed-nine.

36. Delegation of the European Union to Singapore, 'Joint Local Statement on the death penalty case of Pannir Selvam a/l Pranthaman' (Singapore: EEAS, 7 October 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/singapore/joint-local-statement-death-penalty-case-pannir-selvam-al-pranthaman_en.

37. Ahmed Al-Faraji, 'الداخلية تعلن تفكيك 1201 شبكة مخدرات بينها 171 دولية في ثلاث سنوات' (Baghdad: INA, 25 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://ina.iq/ar/security/248692-1201-171.html>. Al Iraqiya, 'صدر حكم الإعدام على 300 تاجر مخدرات، وأكثر من 1000 بالسجن المؤبد، بحسب إحصائيات الفريق أحمد' (Iraq: Al Iraqiya/YouTube, date not given) [online video, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s76Gr-LIYU.

38. HRI could only confirm 203 drug-related death sentences between 2023 and 2025.

they had requested or in cases where the prosecutor's request for a death sentence is not met by the court. On appeal, all nine people were sentenced to death. One notable case involved the head of a drug unit in a police office in Sumatra, who was arrested after it emerged that he was involved in smuggling drugs into Indonesia. He had agreed with an intermediary to seize only some of the drugs and kept the rest to be sold for his benefit. This case demonstrates how some law enforcement agents benefit from drug smuggling by receiving bribes, keeping (and then selling) some of the drugs smuggled and gaining promotions over the cases they 'solve'.³⁹

Similarly in **Sri Lanka**, 10 death sentences were confirmed – the highest number there in five years. Among them was a man arrested over a decade ago in possession of 2.77 grams of heroin.

For the first time, reports were found of a death sentence imposed in **Sudan** for drug trafficking (we have reclassified Sudan from symbolic application to low application as a result). In the absence of official information, this raises concerns that more death sentences may be imposed to enforce the country's drug laws.

Encouragingly, a downward trend in drug-related death sentences was recorded in Singapore and Vietnam. There was a 25% reduction in known drug-related death sentences in **Vietnam** between 2024 and 2025 (from 113 to 85), although government censorship prevents civil society from accessing comprehensive information. Among the people known to have been sentenced to death in Vietnam, at least four are women, and eight are foreign nationals (five from Lao PDR, one from Cambodia, one from Kenya, plus a German citizen of Vietnamese origin). A case which attracted significant attention was that of a Kenyan woman sentenced to death in March 2025 after being arrested with cocaine in her luggage. The woman claimed she had been hired by a man in Kenya, who reportedly paid her USD 1,300 to deliver a suitcase to a woman in Lao PDR and bring other goods back. The woman denied any knowledge of the drugs.⁴⁰ Unlike many other foreign nationals facing the death penalty, the woman received consular assistance,⁴¹ and in July 2025 her sentence was commuted on appeal to life imprisonment.⁴²

39. On corruption in drug law enforcement in Indonesia, see among others: Maidina Rahmawati, 'Decriminalising drug use would help stop corrupt police narcotics trafficking' (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2 November 2022) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/decriminalising-drug-use-would-help-stop-corrupt-police-narcotics-trafficking/>.

40. Hai Duyen, 'Kenyan woman sentenced to death for smuggling 2 kg of drugs through Vietnam' (Hanoi: VNExpress, 6 March 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/crime/kenyan-woman-sentenced-to-death-for-smuggling-2-kg-of-drugs-through-vietnam-4857658.html>.

41. NTV, 'Saving Nduta: Kenyan officials arrive in Vietnam ahead of execution appeal' (Nairobi, NTV, 22 March 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://ntvkenya.co.ke/news/saving-nduta-kenyan-officials-arrive-in-vietnam-ahead-of-execution-appeal/>.

42. Nation Africa, 'Kenyan woman's death penalty commuted to life sentence in Vietnam' (Dar es Salaam, The Citizen, 31 July 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/east-africa-news/margaret-nduta-death-penalty-commuted-life-sentence-in-vietnam-5138130.

In **Singapore**, two drug-related death sentences were reported – the lowest number in a decade. In November 2025, human rights activists and family members whose relatives have been executed in Singapore filed a constitutional challenge to the mandatory nature of the death penalty for drug offences, arguing that this violates the right to life, the right to a fair trial and infringes upon judicial powers.⁴³ The case was dismissed in December 2025 for lack of standing (when those bringing the case are not deemed to have a direct stake in the outcome).

In **Malaysia**, judges seem to be exercising the discretion provided by the 2023 reform which abolished the mandatory death penalty in the country. Judgments show that mitigating factors are now being taken into consideration, including if the offence relates to a small quantity of drugs, if the defendant has cooperated with law enforcement agencies, if the defendant has no previous convictions or is the sole income provider for their family. At least nine people, including two Pakistani nationals, were sentenced to death for drug crimes throughout 2025, and the high quantity of drugs involved in the crimes appears to be a key reason for imposing the death sentence rather than an alternative punishment. Following on from the 2023 reform, in November 2025 the Malaysian government announced it will undertake comprehensive research on the total abolition of the death penalty, to begin in early 2026.⁴⁴ As this was the first year where fewer than 10 drug-related death sentences were confirmed in the country, we have reclassified Malaysia from a high application country to a low application one.

A closer look at death sentences and death row populations confirms that **drug control drives capital punishment in many countries**. In Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam, all or most confirmed death sentences in 2025 were for drug offences; with peaks of 40% in Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen. Meanwhile, most of the people on death row in Indonesia, Lao PDR, Singapore and Thailand had been convicted of drug crimes. In **Thailand**, while only one death sentence could be confirmed as having been imposed for drug trafficking in 2025, the country's death row population has steadily increased in the past five years. This confirms many death sentences are imposed but not publicly reported. The number of people on death row for drug crimes jumped 31% between 2024 and 2025 (from 232 to 304). Strikingly, as of September 2025, all but one of the 42 women on death row in Thailand (a figure that has increased by 8 since 2024) were there due to drug offences.

43. Rocky , 'Press Release: Next-of-kin and activists challenge Singapore's mandatory death penalty for drug offences', (Singapore: Order and Law, 6 November 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.orderandlaw.sg/press-release-next-of-kin-and-activists-challenge-singapores-mandatory-death-penalty-for-drug-offences/.

44. VietNam News, 'Malaysian gov't to conduct in-depth study on abolishing death penalty starting January 2026' (Hanoi: VietNam News, 13 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://vietnamnews.vn/world/1729555/malaysian-gov-t-to-conduct-in-depth-study-on-abolishing-death-penalty-starting-january-2026.html>.

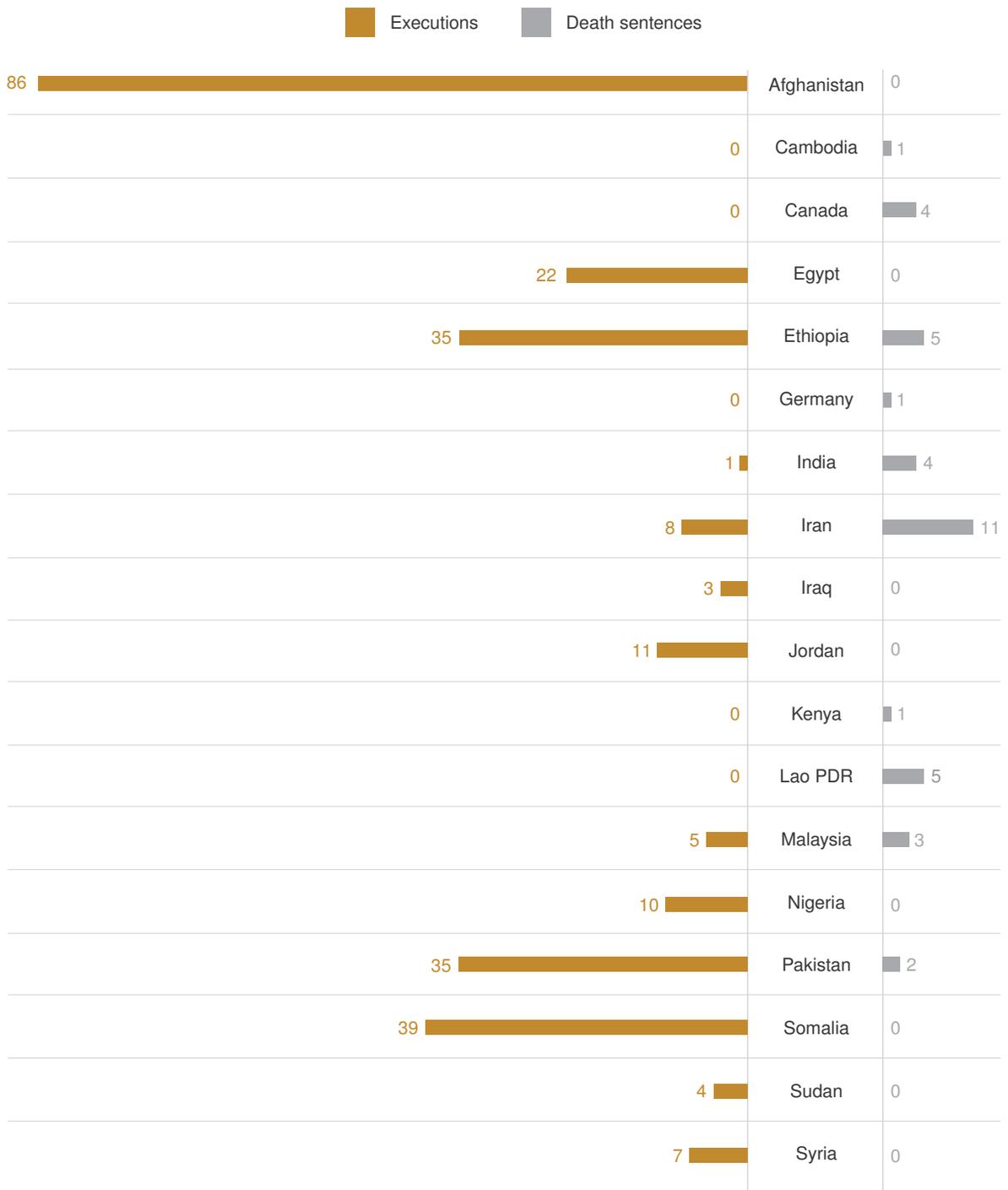
While it is impossible to confirm death row figures for **Iran**, civil society reports have been able to paint a partial picture. Iran Human Rights verified that, as of September 2025, at least 500 people were awaiting execution for drug offences in Ghezelhesar prison (Karaj province), where a significant number of executions took place throughout 2025.⁴⁵ In light of this finding, and of the number of drug-related executions carried out during the year, the actual number of people on death row convicted of drug crimes may well surpass 1,000. Notably, prisons themselves have become spaces of resistance in Iran. The ‘No Execution Tuesdays’ campaign, which has seen people in 55 prisons across the country go on hunger strike to protest executions, reached its 100th week in December 2025.⁴⁶ It was still ongoing in January 2026, despite the state’s attempt to quash it.⁴⁷

Available information also points to a significant number of **foreign nationals** on death row in many countries, mainly for drug offences, mirroring the disproportionate number of foreign nationals being executed for drug crimes. For example, most of – if not all – the 90 foreign nationals currently on death row in Indonesia have been convicted of drug offences.⁴⁸ While officials from the Philippines confirmed that most Philippine nationals on death row abroad involve drug crimes.⁴⁹ Similarly, in Saudi Arabia several Egyptian nationals in Tabuk prison alone are awaiting execution for drug offences.⁵⁰ In light of execution trends, it is likely that most foreign nationals on death row in Saudi Arabia were convicted of drug offences.

Finally, while **Pakistan** removed death as a possible punishment for drug offences in 2023, Justice Project Pakistan reported that, as of January 2026, seven people were still on death row for drug crimes across the country, highlighting the need for further coordination between local and federal authorities.⁵¹ For this reason, Pakistan remains classified as a low application country.

45. Iran Human Rights, ‘500+ Drug Defendants Awaiting Gallows in Ghezelhesar Prison’ (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 28 September 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/8082/>.
46. Iran Freedom Network, ‘No to Execution Tuesdays Campaign Reaches Its 100th Week in 55 Prisons Across Iran’ (Paris: Iran Freedom Network, 23 December 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://iranfreedom.org/en/human-rights/2025/12/no-to-execution-tuesdays-campaign-reaches-its-100th-week-in-55-prisons-across-iran/81987/>.
47. Hengaw , ‘Iran launches coordinated propaganda campaign against prisoners’ hunger strike in Ghezel Hesar’, (Norway: Hengaw, 18 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://hengaw.net/en/reports-and-statistics-1/2025/10/article-6>.
48. Associated Press, ‘British man sentenced to 10 months in Bali for drug offenses after death penalty charge dropped’ (California: Courthouse News Services, 27 May 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.courthousenews.com/british-man-sentenced-to-10-months-in-bali-for-drug-offenses-after-death-penalty-charge-dropped/.
49. Philippine News Agency , ‘3K OFWs face cases abroad, with 24 on death row’ (Cebu: Cebu Daily News, 23 December 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://cebudailynews.inquirer.net/681438/3k-ofws-face-cases-abroad-with-24-on-death-row>.
50. Among others: Tom Levitt, ‘“I’ll be executed on Tuesday”: families reveal panicked last calls from foreigners on Saudi’s death row’ (London: The Guardian, 12 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/nov/12/foreign-prisoners-killed-saudi-arabian-jail-tabuk-prison-egyptians-executed-non-violent-drug-crimes-mohammed-bin-salman.
51. E-mail communication with Justice Project Pakistan, 23 January 2026.

ORIGIN COUNTRY OF FOREIGN NATIONALS KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN SENTENCED TO DEATH OR EXECUTED FOR DRUG OFFENCES IN 2025



DRUG-RELATED COMMUTATIONS AND PARDONS

At least 17 commutations and pardons for individuals sentenced to death for drug offences were granted in 2025.

Seven people received commutations (sentence reductions) in **Indonesia** – all Indonesian men. Five of them were sentenced to death in the High Court after district courts had previously imposed life sentences, but then the Supreme Court reduced their sentences back to life imprisonment. The other two men received death sentences in district courts, which were then commuted by the High Court to life imprisonment.

A number of foreign nationals on death row in Indonesia were also repatriated in 2025 to countries without the death penalty, meaning they have been spared execution. In April, Serge Atlaoui was transferred back to France after being sentenced to death for drug manufacturing in 2007.⁵² In November, Indonesia repatriated Lindsay Sandiford, who spent over a decade on death row for drug trafficking, to the UK.⁵³ And in December, a Dutch person on death row was also sent home.⁵⁴ This follows the repatriations of Australian and Filipino nationals in December 2024.⁵⁵

In **Malaysia**, at least six people who had been sentenced to death for drug trafficking had their death sentences commuted to life imprisonment on appeal. This is in accordance with the 2023 reform, which abolished the mandatory death penalty and allowed for commutation of sentences.

A Kenyan woman had her death sentence reduced to life imprisonment in **Vietnam**, as described in the previous section.

An Asian man (nationality not specified) had his death sentence reduced to life imprisonment in the **United Arab Emirates**, as the Abu Dhabi Federal Court panel did not unanimously agree on the death penalty.

In **Sri Lanka**, one man who had been sentenced to death in 2018 was acquitted on appeal as judges found that the evidence submitted in the case had not met the standard of proof and that fair trial rights had been violated.

52. Oman Al Yahyai, 'French death row inmate Serge Atlaoui repatriated from Indonesia' (Brussels: Euronews, 4 February 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.euronews.com/2025/02/04/french-death-row-inmate-serge-atlaoui-repatriated-from-indonesia.

53. Emily Richards, 'British citizen Lindsay Sandiford has returned to the UK, alongside Shahab Shahabadi', (London: Prisoners Abroad, 7 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://www.prisonersabroad.org.uk/news/british-citizen-lindsay-sandiford-has-returned-alongside-shahab-shahabadi>.

54. Reuters, 'Indonesia sends home two Dutch convicts, one on death row, after repatriation deal', (Jakarta: Reuters, 8 December 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-send-home-two-dutch-convicts-one-death-row-after-repatriation-deal-2025-12-08/.

55. Giada Girelli, Marcela Jofré, and Ajeng Larasati, 'The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024' (London: Harm Reduction International, 2025). Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/HRI-GlobalOverview-2024-FINAL.pdf>.

Lastly, in an unprecedented but much-welcomed move, President Tharman Shanmugaratnam of **Singapore** pardoned a 33-year-old man who had his death sentence commuted to life imprisonment. Clemency was recommended ‘to reduce the disparity in their respective outcomes’ after another suspect in the case eventually escaped capital punishment.⁵⁶

LEGAL REFORMS TO THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG OFFENCES

In a stark reversal of recent trends, two countries introduced the death penalty as a possible punishment for drug offences in 2025.

Algeria retains capital punishment for a broad range of offences, and has hundreds of people on death row, but it has not carried out an execution in over 30 years.⁵⁷ Throughout 2025, officials expressed the need to toughen drug control policies in response to a perceived increase in drug crimes,⁵⁸ in parallel with calls to lift the ongoing moratorium on executions.⁵⁹ Law 25-03, adopted in July 2025 to amend the domestic drug law, increased penalties for drug crimes and introduced the death penalty as a punishment for certain drug offences. The drug offences that now carry a possible death sentence are drug production and trafficking offences, when the crime causes the death of one or more people, when it poses a serious threat to public health or when it is committed under specific aggravating circumstances (for example, if it is committed by a transnational organised crime group or firearms are used). The death penalty is also envisaged for repeat drug offences when the underlying crime is punishable by life imprisonment or falls into certain recidivist (repeat-offender) categories. Further, Article 16b is introduced the death penalty for inciting, recruiting or using a minor, a person with special needs or a person in treatment for drug dependence in the transport, possession, sale, offering, transfer or illicit use of drugs, if the crime is committed in or near an educational establishment.⁶⁰ Although no death sentences have been recorded yet, in November 2025 Algeria’s Justice Minister indicated the measure may be applied – and possibly even implemented – soon.⁶¹

56. Emil Cham and Lydia Lam, ‘Drug trafficker on Singapore death row granted clemency’ (Singapore: Channel News Asia, 15 August 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/drug-trafficker-tristan-tan-death-sentence-granted-clemency-president-5296156.

57. ECPM and LADDH, ‘The Death Penalty in Law and Practice in Algeria’ (Paris: ECPM, 2022). Available from www.ecpm.org/app/uploads/2022/10/flyer-ALGERIE-GB-171022-MD.pdf.

58. APA-Alger, ‘Algérie : jusqu’à la peine de mort pour les trafiquants de drogue’ (Algeria: APA News, 2 May 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://fr.apanews.net/news/algerie-peine-de-mort-et-decheance-de-nationalite-contre-les-trafiquants-de-drogue/>.

59. Baudoin Moucadet, ‘Algérie: Tebboune songerait à réinstaurer la peine de mort’ (Paris: Le Journal du Dimanche, 24 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.lejdd.fr/International/algerie-tebboune-songerait-a-reinstaurer-la-peine-de-mort-163323.

60. People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, ‘Law No. 25-03 of 5 Moharram 1447 corresponding to 1 July 2025 amending and supplementing Law No. 04-18 of 13 Dhu al-Qa’dah 1425 corresponding to 25 December 2004 relating to the prevention and suppression of the illicit use and trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances’ (Algeria: Official Gazette of the Algerian Republic, No. 43, Articles 16, 21, 27; 13 July 2025).

61. Nova News, ‘Algérie: Le ministre de la Justice annonce des peines de prison à vie et la peine capitale pour le trafic de drogue’, (Rome: Nova News, 6 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.agenzianova.com/fr/news/algeria-ministro-giustizia-annuncia-ergastolo-e-pena-capitale-contro-traffico-sostanze-stupefacenti/.

In the **Maldives**, in July 2025 President Mohamed Muizzu instructed the government to revise a Drug Act amendment bill ‘with a view to imposing the death penalty’ for those convicted of drug smuggling or trafficking, ‘in order to save the society from the scourge of drugs’.⁶² Parliament passed the amendments on 3 December 2025, significantly increasing penalties for certain offences. Most notably, the reform introduces mandatory capital punishment for importing illicit substances above a certain quantity. The death penalty can only be imposed by unanimous decision of the Supreme Court bench, and those subject to it will not be eligible for parole, pardon or commutation.⁶³ The president ratified the amendment on 6 December 2025, despite opposition from civil society.⁶⁴

Algeria and the Maldives are now categorised as symbolic application states, due to the lack of known drug-related death sentences given in 2025.

Other countries introduced legislation to expand the applicability of the death penalty for drug offences. **Kuwait’s** Cabinet approved a new decree-law in October 2025, which consolidates Law No. 74 of 1983 and Decree-Law No. 48 of 1987 into a single, more punitive drug control framework. The new legislation broadens the range of death-eligible drug crimes, including by introducing specific aggravating circumstances which automatically trigger capital punishment (such as participating in organised trafficking, exploiting minors or vulnerable people, smuggling drugs into prisons or abusing official authority to facilitate drug crimes).⁶⁵ The law also authorises random drug testing and grants wider enforcement powers to drug control authorities. The draft was endorsed at a weekly Cabinet meeting and sent to the Amiri Diwan (the royal court of the Emir) for final approval. The law, one of Kuwait’s toughest anti-narcotics measures in decades, came into force in December 2025.⁶⁶ Sources also suggest that **North Korea** is expanding the drug crimes that are eligible for a death sentence,⁶⁷ but this information could not be verified.

62. Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network et al., ‘The Maldives: Reject Introduction of Death Penalty For Drug Trafficking and Abolish This Punishment Once And For All’ (London: HRI, 13 August 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Maldives-statement-FINAL.pdf>.
63. Republic of Maldives, ‘Act no. 28/2025 (3rd Amendment to the Narcotics Act no. 17/2011)’ (Maldives: Government Gazette, Issue No. 54, Gazette Notification No. 28/2025, 6 December 2025).
64. Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network, ‘ADPAN And Partner Human Rights Organizations Denounce The Expansion Of The Death Penalty For Drug Offenses In The Maldives’ (Asia Pacific: ADPAN, 9 December 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://adpan.org/adpan-and-partner-human-rights-organizations-denounce-the-expansion-of-the-death-penalty-for-drug-offenses-in-the-maldives/>.
65. Times of India, ‘Kuwait’s new anti-drug rules: Death penalty for traffickers, random tests and million-dollar dinar fines introduce’, (Delhi: Times of India, 30 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/kuwaits-new-anti-drug-rules-death-penalty-for-traffickers-random-tests-and-million-dinar-fines-introduce/>.
66. Sakina Fatima, ‘Kuwait’s new drug law to impose death penalty, life terms’ (Telangana: The Siasat Daily, 30 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.siasat.com/kuwaits-new-drug-law-to-impose-death-penalty-life-terms-3306653/.
67. The Straits Times, ‘Death penalty for saying ‘oppa’?: N. Korea expands law to curb ‘anti-socialist culture’, says S. Korea’ (Singapore: The Straits Times, 30 May 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/death-penalty-for-saying-oppa-north-korea-strengthens-law-to-curb-anti-socialist-culture-in-south.

Debates are also underway in a few countries on expanding or (re-) introducing the death penalty as a tool of drug control. As of February 2026, these debates have not translated into reforms. In the **Philippines**, several bills are pending in Congress to reintroduce the death penalty, particularly targeting drug trafficking. Lawmakers continued debating this in 2025, with some claiming it would reduce drug crimes, while others pointing to a lack of evidence of this measure's effectiveness and its incompatibility with international obligations.⁶⁸ In **Iraq**, Members of Parliament expressed a resolve to adopt a draft bill, which would expand applicability of the death penalty for drug crimes as a way to strengthen drug control efforts,⁶⁹ although it is unclear whether this has happened. The head of **Nigeria's** drug law enforcement agency has also called for the death penalty as a response to drug trafficking.⁷⁰ A draft bill was introduced in 2024 which expanded the scope of the death penalty to drug crimes, but as of February 2026 it had not been adopted.⁷¹

In a welcome contrast to these retrogressive reforms (or attempts thereof), in July 2025, a new law came into force in **Vietnam** which amends the Criminal Code and removes the death penalty for eight offences, including the illegal transportation of narcotic substances, replacing it with life imprisonment. This has reduced the number of death-eligible crimes to 10, including drug manufacturing and trafficking offences.⁷² This is the fourth progressive reform Vietnam has adopted since 1999,⁷³ and was reportedly undertaken to 'demonstrate the humane and compassionate nature' of the government, signal confidence in law enforcement and further align the country with its international obligations.⁷⁴ The reform, which OHCHR welcomed,⁷⁵ also prescribes the commutation of existing death sentences, with sentence reductions reportedly already underway. While the impact of such a reform is still to be seen, the slight reduction in drug-related death sentences recorded in 2025 may represent a positive signal.

68. Gabriel Pacico Lulu, 'Strong cases will stop drug crimes, not death penalty – Arroyo, DOJ' (Manila: Inquirer.Net, 18 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2142547/strong-cases-will-stop-drug-crimes-not-death-penalty-arroyo-doj>, Billy Begas, 'GMA: Death penalty for foreign drug traffickers breaches int'l protocol on human rights' (Quezon City: Politiko, 19 November 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://politiko.com.ph/2025/11/19/gma-death-penalty-for-foreign-drug-traffickers-breaches-intl-protocol-on-human-rights/headlines/>.
69. Wissam Al-Mulla, 'لجنة نيبالية: توجه لترميم مشروع قانون المخدرات بداية الفصل التشريعي المقبل' (Baghdad: INA, 1 August 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://ina.iq/ar/political/225344--.html>.
70. Ben Ezeamalu, 'Nigerian agency seeks death penalty for selling counterfeit medicine' (Lagos: Reuters, 26 February 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigerian-agency-seeks-death-penalty-selling-counterfeit-medicine-2025-02-26/.
71. Giada Girelli, Marcela Jofré, and Ajeng Larasati, 'The Death Penalty for Drug Offences: Global Overview 2024' (London: Harm Reduction International, 2025). Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/HRI-GlobalOverview-2024-FINAL.pdf>.
72. IBAHRI, 'Vietnam: IBAHRI welcomes reduction in scope of death penalty and calls for full abolition' (London: IBAHRI, 8 August 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from [www.ibanet.org/Vietnam-IBAHRI-welcomes-reduction-in-scope-of-death-penalty-and-calls-for-full-abolition#:~:text=advertising%20Leaderboard%20advertising-,Vietnam:%20IBAHRI%20welcomes%20reduction%20in%20scope%20of%20death%20penalty%20and,taking%20bribes%20\(Article%20354\)](http://www.ibanet.org/Vietnam-IBAHRI-welcomes-reduction-in-scope-of-death-penalty-and-calls-for-full-abolition#:~:text=advertising%20Leaderboard%20advertising-,Vietnam:%20IBAHRI%20welcomes%20reduction%20in%20scope%20of%20death%20penalty%20and,taking%20bribes%20(Article%20354)).
73. For more details about the previous reforms, see Giada Girelli, 'Gaining Ground: How States abolish or restrict application of the death penalty for drug offences' (London: Harm Reduction International, 2024). Available from https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HRI_Gaining-Ground-FINAL.pdf.
74. Chủ Nhật, 'Thủ tướng: Hạn chế áp dụng án tử hình thể hiện tính nhân văn, nhân đạo' (Hanoi: VOV, 13 April 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/thu-tuong-han-che-ap-dung-an-tu-hinh-the-hien-tinh-nhan-van-nhan-dao-post1191632.vov?jskey=gublNUPY44OEQyWEkQyZT53%2BbHUhW5P8Ag%3D%3D>. Lê Việt Dũng, 'Why is the death penalty being scaled back?' (Hanoi: VietNam News, 4 July 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1720771/why-is-the-death-penalty-being-scaled-back.html>.
75. OHCHR, 'Viet Nam: Parliament votes to abolish death penalty for some offences' (Geneva: OHCHR, 27 June 2025) [online statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/06/viet-nam-parliament-votes-abolish-death-penalty-some-offences.

KEY INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

KEY INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The death penalty for drug offences remained a key issue in international fora in 2025.

Debates and reports at the **Human Rights Council** (HRC) highlighted global trends and country concerns. Speakers at the biennial high-level panel on the death penalty, held in February 2025, expressed concern for the ongoing spike in executions, including for drug offences, while highlighting the positive impact of legal reforms, such as that in Malaysia.⁷⁶ Member states, including Australia, Belgium (on behalf the death penalty core group)⁷⁷, the European Union, Iceland (on behalf of Nordic Baltic countries) and Sierra Leone expressed their concern for the use of the death penalty in cases that do not meet the legal threshold of ‘most serious crimes’, including drug crimes.

Throughout the year, the scale of drug-related executions, death sentences and death row populations were addressed in several reports presented to the HRC, including by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran,⁷⁸ the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls⁷⁹ and the UN Secretary General.⁸⁰ In an HRC debate on the death penalty, following the UN Secretary General’s report, Mongolia, on behalf of the core group on the death penalty, expressed concerns over the surge in executions for drug-related offences, describing it as running ‘counter to the dominant movement, led by the Global South, to abolish the death penalty’.⁸¹

The HRC adopted two topical resolutions. Resolution 60/17 on the question of the death penalty (adopted by vote) reaffirmed international human rights norms related to the death penalty, raised concern for the continued application of the death penalty in cases that do not meet the standard of most serious crimes, such as drug-related offences, and called on states to protect the rights of those facing capital punishment.

76. Harm Reduction International, ‘58th Session of the Human Rights Council: Drug Policy Highlights’ (London: HRI, April 2025). Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/HRC58-Briefing-Drug-Policy-Highlights.-WEB.pdf>.

77. ‘Death penalty core group’ refers to an informal coalition of states that leads on Human Rights Council resolutions on the question of the death penalty.

78. Human Rights Council, ‘Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, UN Doc. A/HRC/58/62 (Geneva: UNHRC, 12 March 2025).

79. Human Rights Council, ‘Visit to Thailand: Report of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls’, UN Doc. A/HRC/59/45/Add.2 (Geneva: UNHRC, 19 May 2025).

80. Human Rights Council, ‘Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, UN Doc. A/HRC/59/22 (Geneva: UNHRC, 18 June 2025); Human Rights Council, ‘Question of the death penalty’, UN Doc. A/HRC/60/47 (Geneva: UNHRC, 13 August 2025).

81. Joint statement of the core group on the Question of the death penalty, 60th Session of the Human Rights Council, General Debate item 3 (18 September 2025). Available from https://hrcmeetings.ohchr.org/HRCSessions/HRCDocuments/89/SP/89_18842522_5c988a95-300f-407a-be7c-cf91301ab875.docx.

Resolution 60/26 (adopted by consensus) addressed the human rights implication of drug policy and reaffirmed the urgent need to further align drug policies with human rights. Regrettably, after highly contentious negotiations, the final text failed to address the use of the death penalty for drug offences.

The death penalty for drug crimes was also addressed at Universal Periodic Review sessions. **Brunei, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Lao PDR, North Korea and Qatar** received recommendations to abolish capital punishment, establish moratoria and limit application of the death penalty to the most serious crimes. Lao PDR accepted recommendations to impose a moratorium and reduce death-eligible crimes, and Egypt agreed to consider restricting the death penalty to serious crimes. North Korea also accepted two recommendations on reducing the number of death-eligible crimes, with a focus on the most serious crimes. The rest of the countries rejected the recommendations.

Treaty bodies also addressed the issue of the death penalty. Among others, the Human Rights Committee expressed concerns that **Vietnam** retains the death penalty for non-lethal offences, such as drug trafficking, and recommended halting executions, reducing death-eligible crimes and improving transparency.⁸² The Committee Against Torture made similar recommendations to **Bahrain**.⁸³ While the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged **Thailand** to ‘codify gender-specific defences and mitigation in capital trials that include all forms of gender-based violence, mental health concerns, disabilities, poverty, economic pressure and caretaking responsibilities in clemency appeals; take the necessary steps towards the abolition of the death penalty; and establish a formal moratorium on executions pending its full abolition’.⁸⁴

Drug control bodies were less consistent. Some attention was devoted to the death penalty at the 68th session of the **Commission on Narcotic Drugs** in March 2025, where civil society, OHCHR, the European Union and member states including Australia, Liechtenstein, Aotearoa New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and Zambia expressed strong opposition to the death penalty as a tool of drug control.⁸⁵ Some echoed the recommendations of the **International Narcotics Control Board**, which in its 2024 Annual Report (published in March 2025) encouraged ‘States that have abolished capital punishment for drug offences not to reintroduce it, and ... those States that retain capital punishment for that category of offence to commute death sentences that have already been handed down and to consider abolishing the death penalty for drug-related offences’. Meanwhile, **UNODC** failed to take any public stance on the issue, to include any reference to executions and death sentences in its 2025 World Drug Report, or to adjust its cooperation with retentionist countries, despite clear evidence of systemic human rights violations and mounting civil society pressure.

82. Human Rights Committee, ‘Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Viet Nam’, UN Doc. CCPR/C/VNM/CO/4 (Geneva: OHCHR, 12 August 2025).

83. Committee Against Torture, ‘Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Bahrain’, UN Doc. CAT/C/BHR/CO/4 (Geneva: OHCHR, 19 January 2026).

84. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, ‘Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Thailand’, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/THA/8 (Geneva: OHCHR, 10 July 2025).

85. For a compilation of statements at CND, see <https://cnblog.org/>.

An interesting development came from the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations** (ASEAN). For the first time, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) held a training which focused on the human rights implications of drug policy. Training participants, which included several AICHR representatives, underscored the limitations of war on drugs approaches, called for rights-based, health-centred and community-led policies and identified priorities for ASEAN's future drug strategy, which included decriminalisation, civil society participation, regional cooperation and addressing the socio-economic root causes of drug use.⁸⁶

SPOTLIGHT 3: EXECUTIONS IN IRAN: IS UNODC AT RISK OF COMPLICITY?

Throughout 2025, a broad range of organisations, including the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre on Human Rights in Iran,⁸⁷ Iran Human Rights,⁸⁸ Amnesty International and HRI,⁸⁹ called on UNODC to stop its ongoing cooperation with drug law enforcement in executing countries, most notably Iran.

In 2017, Iran amended its Anti-Narcotics Law with a view to reducing drug executions. A contributing factor was the perceived risk of losing UNODC support, which in turn was motivated by countries, such as Ireland and Denmark, threatening to cut funding to the agency.⁹⁰ The amended law led to a decrease in executions between 2018 and 2020, but they began to rise again in 2021. Amid growing executions, and despite civil society concerns, UNODC renewed its cooperation with Iran through a new Country Partnership Programme (CPP) for 2023-2026. While parts of the programme, such as the subprogramme on drug prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and HIV care, focus on protecting the health of people who use drugs, including through harm reduction services, others parts of the CPP may be enabling rights violations. Of particular concern is Subprogramme 1 (Border Management and Illicit Trafficking) whose stated aim is to 'strengthen national drugs, illicit chemical precursors' diversion interdiction capacities and regional/international cooperation initiatives'.

86. ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (, 'ASEAN strengthens cooperation, and charts new path on human rights and health-based approaches to drug policies through landmark AICHR training in Malaysia' (Jakarta: AIHCR, 7 October 2025) [online media statement, accessed January 2026]. Available from <https://bit.ly/4brfxEB>.

87. Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre for Human Rights in Iran, 'Forgotten Behind Closed Doors', (Washington DC: ABC, 10 October 2025) [online article, accessed January 2026]. Available from www.iranrights.org/newsletter/issue/164.

88. Iran Human Rights, 'A Village of Graves: Widespread and Systematic Drug Executions in Iran' (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 2025). Available from https://iranhr.net/media/files/A_Village_of_Graves.pdf.

89. NGO Joint Statement, '2025 World Drug Day: UNODC and CND must take urgent action to end unlawful use of the death penalty for drug-related offences' (London: HRI: 25 June 2025). Available from <https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/2025-WDD-joint-statement-final-text-25062025.pdf>.

90. Giada Girelli, 'Gaining Ground: How States abolish or restrict application of the death penalty for drug offences' (London: Harm Reduction International, 2024). Available from https://hri.global/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/HRI_Gaining-Ground-FINAL.pdf.

Throughout 2024, despite a record number of executions in Iran that year, UNODC continued supporting drug law enforcement with trainings and equipment.⁹¹ This suggests UNODC failed to critically assess and review its cooperation in light of the growing number of executions (as required by UN policies). Concerningly, Iran reportedly uses its cooperation with UNODC ‘as an argument to justify the execution of alleged drug offenders’,⁹² indicating a risk of UN complicity in state killings.

In 2025, Iran further intensified its use of the death penalty. In light of this, UNODC should urgently pause its cooperation with the Iranian government while assessing whether the agency is at risk of becoming complicit with human rights violations, and move to engage the Iranian government in line with the UN’s principled position against the death penalty.⁹³ The end of the CPP in 2026 provides an opportunity for UNODC to critically evaluate the programme, using a transparent and inclusive process, and readjust its support for drug law enforcement in the country.

91. Among others, see: UNODC , ‘UNODC in Iran Supports National Anti-Narcotic Forces with Advanced Skills Training’ (Tehran: UNODC, December 2023). Available from www.unodc.org/islamicrepublicofiran/en/unodc-in-iran-supports-national-anti-narcotic-forces-with-advanced-skills-training.html. UNODC, ‘UNODC Iran supports Islamic Republic of Iran in Supply Reduction Activities’ (Tehran: UNODC, 24 July 2024). Available from www.unodc.org/islamicrepublicofiran/en/unodc-iran-supports-islamic-republic-of-iran-in-supply-reduction-activities.html.

92. Iran Human Rights, ‘A Village of Graves: Widespread and Systematic Drug Executions in Iran’ (Oslo: Iran Human Rights, 2025). Available from https://iranhr.net/media/files/A_Village_of_Graves.pdf.

93. See United Nations Development Group, ‘Death Penalty: Excerpt from UNDG Guidance Note on Human Rights for Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams’ (New York: UNDG, 2017). Available from <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Death-Penalty.PDF>.

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