

United for a world without the death penalty

Today, on this World Day against the Death Penalty, we reaffirm our commitment to the universal abolition of the death penalty.

On the positive side, we have been witnessing a worldwide trend towards restricting and abolishing the death penalty for decades. Of the 193 UN member states, only 36, or just under 20%, still apply the death penalty. Whereas the death penalty was still the rule in the 1980s, today it is the exception. This cruel form of punishment is now almost banished from Europe – with one exception. It is time for Belarus to also cease executions and free all of Europe from the death penalty – forever.

We note with concern, however, that some countries in the world are seriously discussing the reintroduction of the death penalty and that executions are being resumed in other countries after longstanding moratoriums. This is contrary to the global trend and to some extent contravenes international law. We call on all states to comply with their international obligations and respect the spirit of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which provides for a progressive abolition of the death penalty.

Many people in this world still live in states where they face the threat of the death penalty. They run the risk of being arbitrarily or even falsely sentenced to death and executed. It is often poor people who are punished with death because they lack the means to defend themselves effectively against accusations. With the theme 'Poverty and justice – a deadly mix' we draw attention to this injustice on this World Day against the Death Penalty. Members of ethnic, religious or sexual minorities are also more likely to be victims of the death penalty. In resolutions that we have recently adopted in the UN Human Rights Council, we call on states that have not yet abolished the death penalty to eliminate discrimination and inequality of treatment through the death penalty and not to apply capital punishment under any circumstances to persons who were minors at the time of their offence, persons with mental or intellectual disabilities, or pregnant women.

Irrespective of whether it is applied in a discriminatory manner, whether it is applied to convicted persons who are actually innocent, and whether it is used to eliminate political opponents or not – the death penalty is incompatible with our understanding of human rights. Our national laws prohibit the death penalty. In ratifying the relevant additional protocols to the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, we have committed ourselves internationally to never again impose or enforce the death penalty. 85 states have taken the same path and committed themselves to abolishing the death penalty in the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Whoever thinks that the death penalty is a means of combating violence, crime and terrorism, we oppose that view as follows: scientific studies show that neither criminals nor terrorists can be deterred by the death penalty. Instead of preventing violence, the death penalty creates even more violence. It may satisfy the desire for retribution, but in no way does it make amends for the loss suffered by the victims of crime and their families. The death penalty exacerbates the problems rather than solving them.

We are committed to ensuring that the dignity and human rights of each individual human being are protected, not only in our own countries, not just in Europe, but throughout the world. In our view, the death penalty is symbolic of the countless violations of human rights in today's world. The death penalty has no place in the 21st century.

In dialogue with the countries concerned, we will work to ensure that the death penalty is restricted and abolished. Achieving a universal moratorium would be an important step towards that goal. We will continue to raise the issue of the death penalty in multilateral forums and promote global and regional initiatives for its abolition. We give recognition to and support the efforts of committed women and men from civil society, politics, justice, science and culture around the world. Together we will strive for a world without the death penalty.

The foreign ministers of Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Switzerland.