

TESTIMONY FOR THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE PUBLIC HEARING OF 6/11/15
SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF THE BETHLEHEM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL GROUP

Amnesty International, through its Bethlehem group, is submitting these brief remarks to the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee in support of the Pennsylvanian Death Penalty Moratorium. Our members support the work of the Pennsylvania Senate Resolution 6 Task Force and have submitted information to this Senate death penalty study group.

We are a working group of Amnesty International USA, an international organization which monitors the status of human rights in more than 150 countries, based on research conducted by investigative missions throughout the world. AI unilaterally opposes the death penalty and works for its demise because of the injustices inherent in this system. In the USA, the death penalty has proven to be racially and economically biased. It sometimes claims innocent lives. It does not deter crime. It diverts resources from genuine efforts to make our communities safer. It has minimized the impacts of mental illness and is often arbitrary as demonstrated by the limited resources provided for indigent defendants.

Internationally, the numbers of nations that still retain execution as a punishment have fallen precipitously in the last 20 years. By last December, 98 countries had abolished the death penalty, a significant increase from the 59 countries which had ended it as of 1995. Another 40 some countries are regarded as having abolished the death penalty in practice and are not carrying out executions. The death penalty has been abolished in all European countries, except Belarus and Kazakhstan (partly in Europe and partly in Asia). Having said that, the question is where does the USA fit in this patchwork of state-ordered killings?

In 2014, the USA ranked fifth in the world among nations that conduct executions. The others in the “top six” were China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Sudan. From the perspective of honoring human rights, this is not particularly desirable company.

It is from the international perspective from which we view and judge the human rights situation in the USA and in our own state of Pennsylvania. Bethlehem area AI members support Pennsylvania’s examination of this seriously flawed system and stand firmly in support of halting executions while the Senate study continues. As former AIUSA Executive Director William F. Schulz said, “Just as we do not rape the rapist, rob the robber, we should not murder the murderer.” Thank you for examining this important topic.

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