

URGENT ACTION

DRUG-RELATED EXECUTIONS SURGING IN IRAN

Fears are mounting that thousands of people have been sentenced to death and are at risk of execution or are facing investigations or prosecution on capital drug-related offences, amid a horrific surge in executions in Iran. In 2023, at least 481 people were executed for drug-related offences – over half of the total of at least 853 executions carried out. Members of the oppressed Baluchi minority were disproportionately impacted, accounting for 29% of all drug-related executions, despite making up about 5% of the population.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Head of judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei

c/o Embassy of Iran to the European Union, Avenue Franklin Roosevelt No. 15, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium

Dear Mr Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei,

I am deeply concerned about the surge in arbitrary drug-related executions following grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts, with at least 481 such executions recorded in 2023, representing over half of overall executions that year and an 89% rise from 2022. As the Iranian authorities refuse to publish statistics on the death penalty, the exact number of people sentenced to death or undergoing criminal proceedings for drug-related offences that incur the death penalty is not known. However, based on official statements, including announcements of drug-related arrests across the country, it is feared that thousands of individuals have been sentenced to death and are at risk of execution, or are being prosecuted or investigated for capital drug-related offences. Fears of further drug-related executions have mounted amid an alarming upward trajectory in such executions since Ebrahim Raisi's rise to the presidency in 2021, coupled with recent statements by top officials criticizing the 2017 reforms to the Anti-Narcotics Law which had resulted in a fall in drug-related executions from 2018 to 2020. In January 2024, a parliamentary committee approved a new bill to reform this law which, if adopted, will expand the range of drug-related offences incurring the death penalty. International human rights law prohibits the death penalty for drug-related and other offences that do not meet the threshold of "most serious crimes," which are crimes involving intentional killing.

The authorities' use of the death penalty for drug-related offences disproportionately impacts poor and marginalized communities, contributing to a cycle of poverty and injustice and further entrenching discrimination. In 2023, the oppressed Baluchi ethnic minority accounted for 29% of all drug-related executions while making up about 5% of Iran's population and were often executed in secret without notice to families and lawyers. Revolutionary Courts, which exercise jurisdiction over drug-related offences, lack independence and operate under the influence of security and intelligence bodies. Individuals tried before such courts are systematically denied their fair trial rights, including to adequate defence, to meaningfully challenge the legality of their detention, to presumption of innocence, to not self-incriminate, to a meaningful review, and to a fair and public hearing. Revolutionary Courts also persistently rely on torture-tainted "confessions" to convict and sentence people to death.

I urge you to immediately halt all drug-related executions, quash convictions and death sentences issued following grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts, and establish an official moratorium on executions with a view to fully abolishing the death penalty. Pending this, take steps to bring national legislation in line with international law and standards, including by removing the death penalty for drug-related offences and repealing mandatory death sentences.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In 2023, Amnesty International [recorded](#) at least 853 executions as prisons across Iran were transformed into sites of mass killings with more than half (481) of the executions carried out for drug-related offences. The use of the death penalty disproportionately impacted Iran's oppressed Baluchi ethnic minority. Of the at least 172 Baluchi men and women executed, 138 were for drug-related offences, accounting for 29% of all drug-related executions in Iran. Baluchis reside predominantly in Sistan and Baluchestan, one of Iran's poorest and underdeveloped provinces, due to the central government's persistent underinvestment. The Iranian authorities have consistently neglected the root causes of involvement in drug offences, such as economic deprivation and systemic marginalization. Individuals executed for drug-related offences in 2023, especially from the Baluchi minority, are also often executed in secret with families denied final visits. Families usually learn of the executions when called by prison authorities to collect the bodies of their loved ones. According to Baluchi human rights activists, in the course of two days on 30 July and 1 August 2023, the authorities secretly executed at least 11 Baluchi men for drug-related offences without prior notification to their families or final visits.

Prior to 2017, the Iranian authorities executed hundreds of individuals annually for drug-related offences. Global outcries condemning drug-related executions of 638 people in 2015 and 328 people in 2016 led to the legislative reforms of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Law in October 2017 that required higher quantities of seized drugs for imposing mandatory death sentences. In January 2018, the then head of the judiciary paused drug-related executions and mandated reviews for potential commutation under the reforms. Following this, drug-related executions fell to 25 in 2018, 30 in 2019 and 23 in 2020. These improvements were short-lived as after Ebrahim Raisi's rise to the presidency in August 2021, and the subsequent appointment of Gholamhossein Eje'i as the Head of the Judiciary. Since then, top judicial authorities and officials at the Anti-Narcotics Headquarters have publicly criticized the 2017 reforms. These criticisms have been coupled with efforts by the executive, judicial and legislative branches to enact a new anti-narcotics law, which, if adopted, would expand the range of seized drugs that would incur the death penalty. In April 2022, the Director of Legal Affairs at the Anti-Narcotics Headquarters, Mohammad Tarahomi, announced that a decree from Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, for "anti-narcotics laws to be updated and reformed in Parliament" had prompted the judiciary and Anti-Narcotics Headquarters to collaborate in drafting a new anti-narcotics bill containing 115 articles. In December 2022, the government submitted a five-article bill to parliament based on President Ebrahim Raisi's instructions to prioritize some sections of the bill and following his public calls to intensify the "relentless battle against drugs". As of early January 2024, Parliament's Legal and Judicial Commission had approved the general principles of the bill. In the aftermath of the "Woman Life Freedom" uprising, Iranian authorities intensified their use of the death penalty as a tool of political repression to torment and terrorize people and impose silence and subservience through brute force. Executions recorded in 2023 were the highest number since 2015 and mark a 48% increase from 2022 and a 172% increase from 2021.

The use of the death penalty for drug-related offences and the imposition of mandatory death sentences contravenes international law and standards. Article 6(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran has ratified, and Safeguard No.1 of the UN Safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty, adopted through UN Economic and Social Council resolution 1984/50, provides that for countries where the death penalty has not yet been abolished, the imposition of the death penalty must be restricted to the "most serious crimes". The UN Human Rights Committee has held that "the most serious crimes" appertain only to crimes involving intentional killing. Crimes not resulting directly and intentionally in death, such as [...] drug [...] offences, although serious in nature, can never serve as the basis, within the framework of article 6, for the imposition of the death penalty. [...]" The imposition of the mandatory death penalty is also prohibited under international law. The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that "the automatic and mandatory imposition of the death penalty constitutes an arbitrary deprivation of life [...] in circumstances where the death penalty is imposed without any possibility of taking into account the defendant's personal circumstances or the circumstances of the particular offence". Amnesty International has also [repeatedly called](#) on the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies, including the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), to make the abolition of the death penalty an integral component of all programmes to promote drug policy reform, prevent crime and improve criminal justice systems globally. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception. The death penalty is a violation of the right to life as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and it is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. Amnesty International has consistently called on all states that retain the death penalty, including Iran, to establish an official moratorium on executions, with a view to completely abolishing the death penalty.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Persian and English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 30 May 2024.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: All individuals facing the death penalty for drug-related offences.