

A call for more humane living conditions for death row inmates

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The Catholic Commission for Social Justice (CCSJ) & The Greater Caribbean for Life (GCL) call for more humane living conditions for those on death row

CCSJ and GCL call for more humane living conditions for those on death row. On 10 October 2018 abolitionists around the world will observe the 16th World Day Against the Death Penalty. This year, the World Day will focus on the living conditions of those sentenced to death.

Leela Ramdeen, Chair of CCSJ & GCL, states: “Too often the *UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (the Nelson Mandela Rules) are ignored and many prisoners on death row are confined to harsh and inhumane conditions. A revised version of the 1955 Rules was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly on 17 Dec 2015. The Rules set out ‘the minimum standards for good prison management, including to ensure the rights of prisoners are respected.’”

As the World Coalition against the Death Penalty states: “According to Amnesty International’s 2017 annual report, at least 21,919 people were known to be under a sentence of death worldwide at the end of 2017. The Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide estimates the number of people sentenced to death around the world to be slightly less than 40, 000. Although people on death row are entitled to the same basic rights and treatment conditions as other categories of prisoners, as set out in the... Nelson Mandela rules, many testimonies document the inhumane living conditions that people sentenced to death endure.

“Although conditions of detention for people sentenced to death vary from one country to another, they always affect not only the person sentenced to death, but also their families, relatives, lawyers, and others. People on death row have very little contact with their family and lawyers, as access to death row is often very limited.”

Inhuman living conditions on death rows also include overcrowding, solitary confinement, substandard physical and psychological health care, a lack of access to sufficient religious services and insufficient access to natural light, fresh air and outdoor activities as many are confined in small cells for up to 23 hours per day. Ariel Dulitzky, director of Texas' Human Rights Clinic, says: "Any person who is kept in solitary confinement for more than 15 days starts to suffer mental and psychological effects that cannot be reversed, and that fits the definition of torture."

While we all take action to reduce crime and address the needs of victims, let us not lose our humanity by trampling on the dignity of those on death rows. This diminishes all of us.

We welcome the fact that Pope Francis has revised the Catholic Catechism (2267) making it clear that "the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person, and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide." Today 142 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Let us devote our energies to find non-lethal means to hold offenders accountable for their crimes and more effective/humane ways of building just societies; promoting respect for life and for the rule of law.

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