



Methods of Execution and the Prohibition Against Torture and Other Ill-Treatment: Objective 3

Submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights

a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with ECOSOC since 1996

International Federation for Human Rights

and

The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty

in response to the Call for input by the Special Rapporteur on summary, extrajudicial or arbitrary executions: The death penalty from the perspective of the prohibition against torture and other forms of ill-treatment and the protection of human dignity

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The Advocates for Human Rights (The Advocates) is a volunteer-based non-governmental organization committed to the impartial promotion and protection of international human rights standards and the rule of law since its founding in 1983. The Advocates conducts a range of programs to promote human rights in the United States and around the world, including monitoring and fact finding, direct legal representation, education and training, and publication. The Advocates is the primary provider of legal services to low-income asylum seekers in the Upper Midwest region of the United States. The Advocates is committed to ensuring human rights protection for women around the world. The Advocates has published more than 25 reports on violence against women as a human rights issue, provided consultation and commentary of draft laws on domestic violence, and trained lawyers, police, prosecutors, judges, and other law enforcement personnel to effectively implement new and existing laws on domestic violence. In 1991, The Advocates adopted a formal commitment to oppose the death penalty worldwide and organized a death penalty project to provide pro bono assistance on post-conviction appeals, as well as education and advocacy to end capital punishment. The Advocates currently holds a seat on the Steering Committee of the World Coalition against the Death Penalty.

The **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)** is an international human rights NGO that unites 188 member organizations from 116 countries. Since its foundation in 1922, FIDH has been defending all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

The **World Coalition Against the Death Penalty** is a membership-based global network committed to strengthening the international dimension of the fight against the death penalty. Established in 2002, its ultimate objective is to obtain the universal abolition of the death penalty. To achieve its goal, the World Coalition advocates for a definitive end to death sentences and executions in those countries where the death penalty is in force. In some countries, it is seeking to obtain a reduction in the use of capital punishment as a first step towards abolition.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report provides a high-level survey of execution methods currently practiced or authorized in multiple countries and evaluates their compliance with international human rights standards at a general level. The report concludes that all authorized methods entail a substantial and foreseeable risk of severe pain, prolonged suffering, and/or serious violations of human dignity.
2. Methods of execution such as hanging, electrocution, beheading, stoning, and crucifixion entail the probable (if not inevitable) likelihood of extended suffering, with several being compounded by intense psychological harm through the prolonged and sometimes public spectacle of the execution itself.
3. Some authorities assert that other execution methods are more “humane,” such as lethal injection, nitrogen hypoxia, and firing squad. Yet lethal injection and nitrogen hypoxia are effectively experimental in nature, and the degree of suffering arising out of execution by firing squad is entirely dependent on the skill and intention of the executioners. All three of these methods have resulted in well-documented cases of significant physical suffering.
4. None of the execution methods currently practiced or authorized can be consistently reconciled with international human rights standards. The continued use of the death penalty, regardless of method, violates the prohibition against torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, thereby reinforcing the imperative of universal abolition.

I. Lethal Injection

5. China, the United States of America, and Viet Nam use lethal injection to carry out executions.
6. Lethal injection involves the intravenous administration of one or more drugs—typically a sedative, a paralytic, and a cardiac-arrest agent—to induce unconsciousness, respiratory failure, and cardiac arrest. Most jurisdictions (including among the various states in the USA that authorize lethal injection) employ either a three-drug sequence or a single, high-dose sedative. In some instances, authorities have resorted to two-drug combinations—often a high-dose sedative with a strong painkiller—due to export restrictions and other barriers to obtaining traditional execution drugs.¹
7. Among the authorized methods, lethal injection has the highest rate of “botched” executions. A review of more than 200 autopsies of people executed by lethal injection found that 84% displayed evidence of pulmonary edema, a condition of fluid filling the lungs and causing the sensation of suffocation or drowning, which experts likened to waterboarding.²
8. Pharmaceutical companies object to authorities using their drugs in executions, and professional medical bodies deem participation in such executions to be unethical. As a

¹ Death Penalty Information Center, “Execution Method Descriptions,” accessed Feb. 25, 2025, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/methods-of-execution/description-of-each-method>.

² Noah Caldwell, Ailsa Chang, and Jolie Myers, *Gasping For Air: Autopsies Reveal Troubling Effects Of Lethal Injection*, NPR, Sep. 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/21/793177589/gasping-for-air-autopsies-reveal-troubling-effects-of-lethal-injection>.

consequence, some jurisdictions procure drugs by subterfuge or from unreliable sources.³ Some jurisdictions use personnel who lack appropriate medical training to carry out the execution protocol.⁴ Many jurisdictions have adopted secrecy laws prohibiting people from learning the sources of the drugs to be used in their executions and the identities and qualifications of the people who will administer the execution protocol.⁵

9. Recent examples of “botched” executions include the execution of Clarence Dixon in Arizona in May 2022 during which officials failed to establish an IV line for around 25 minutes before cutting into his groin, causing bleeding and apparent distress prior to the lethal injection being administered⁶. During the course of two days in November 2022, authorities in Arizona, Texas and Alabama botched the execution of Murray Hooper, Stephen Barbee, and Kenneth Smith, respectively. Execution teams failed for more than 25 minutes to set the necessary execution lines for Hooper and 35 minutes for Barbee, and for the second time in two months, Alabama called off an execution in progress, failing in numerous attempts to set Smith’s execution line at all.⁷ In February 2024, authorities in Idaho called off the execution of Thomas Creech after the execution team spent 58 minutes trying and failing to establish a functional IV in his “arms, legs, hands, and feet.” Idaho defense attorneys issued a statement: “This is what happens when unknown individuals with unknown training are assigned to carry out an execution.”⁸

II. Hanging

10. Hanging is probably the most common method of execution worldwide; retentionist states such as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Singapore, and Syria all use hanging as their primary method of execution.⁹
11. There are two ways in which a person can be executed by hanging: a short drop or a long drop. Both methods operate by suspending a person from the neck with a noose or ligature. A short

³ Aiden Lewis, *Lethal injection: Secretive US states resort to untested drugs*, BBC News, Nov. 15, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24935868>.

⁴ Franchesca Fanucchi, *The Problematic Nature of Execution by Lethal Injection in the United States and People’s Republic of China*, Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science, Vol. 8, Art. 9 (2020), <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1087&context=themis>; Expert Calls Arizona’s First Execution in Eight Years ‘Botched’ After Witnesses Report Problems Inserting IV, Death Penalty Information Center, May 19, 2022, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/witnesses-report-problems-inserting-iv-in-arizonas-first-execution-in-eight-years>.

⁵ Samantha Semiatin, Comment, *Lethal Injection Secrecy Laws: A Cruel and Unusual Solution for the Preservation of Capital Punishment*, 28 J. Health Care L. & Pol’y (2025), at 55-58, <https://digitalcommons.law.umaryland.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1453&context=jhclp>; Leah Roemer, *New Resource: In Era of Secrecy, States Increasingly Restrict Media Access to Executions*, Death Penalty Information Center, Mar. 14, 2025, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/new-resource-in-era-of-secrecy-states-increasingly-restrict-media-access-to-executions>.

⁶ Expert Calls Arizona’s First Execution in Eight Years ‘Botched’ After Witnesses Report Problems Inserting IV, Death Penalty Information Center, Mar. 14, 2025, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/witnesses-report-problems-inserting-iv-in-arizonas-first-execution-in-eight-years>.

⁷ *As Lethal Injection Turns Forty, States Botch a Record Number of Executions*, Death Penalty Information Center, Mar. 14, 2025, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/as-lethal-injection-turns-forty-states-botch-a-record-number-of-executions>.

⁸ Death Penalty Information Center, “Botched Executions,” accessed Feb. 24, 2026, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/botched-executions>.

⁹ Amnesty International, *Death Sentences and Executions 2024* (2025), at 11, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act50/8976/2025/en/>.

drop involves dropping the person from a lower height and leads to death by suffocation, which is generally considered to be extremely painful.¹⁰ The long drop is intended to break the neck instantly; however, it can take up to 20 minutes for the heart to stop beating.¹¹ If the drop is too long or the rope too strong, decapitation can also occur.¹²

12. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran has interviewed family members of people whom Iranian authorities have executed and has learned that people sentenced to death or their families “may be required to pay a ‘rope fee’ for their own hanging.” A prison guard told the Center that the fee was 30 million toman, or the equivalent of \$303 US. The Center documented that the families of T.N. and B.O. were required to pay a rope fee in 2025. Authorities gave the wife of a Baluch man executed in 2025 two options: “a soft rope for a fee or a hard rope for free.” She could not afford the fee and when she retrieved her husband’s body, she saw that his “neck appeared as if a ‘knife had cut his throat’ and was broken, along with his arm.”¹³
13. A member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Tanzania reports that hanging procedures in that country “may cause severe physical pain, particularly where death results from slow strangulation rather than immediate loss of consciousness.”

III. Execution by shooting (firing squad)

14. Execution by shooting (firing squad) is practiced in at least China, Indonesia, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Taiwan, the United States, and Yemen.
15. Authorities assert that execution by firing squad is relatively painless; the procedure involves one or more shooters firing at the person’s heart, presumably resulting in a rapid and fatal blood loss. Whether this method causes extreme pain depends primarily on the shooter(s) not missing the heart, either accidentally or intentionally. If the shooters miss the heart but strike another part of the torso, the person could slowly bleed to death in excruciating pain.
16. For example, on April 11, 2025, a three-person firing squad in South Carolina executed Mikal Mahdi. News reports of the execution stated that Mr. Mahdi remained conscious for as long as 60 seconds following the shooting.¹⁴ An autopsy confirmed that “he was shot with only two bullets, not three. Both entered just above his abdomen, shattering into metal splinters that

¹⁰ Zaria Gorvett, *The people rethinking methods of execution*, BBC Future, June 6, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20180604-is-there-a-humane-way-to-kill-a-criminal>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See also *اعدام در بلوچستان؛ گفتند قاچاقچی موادند اما پول طناب نرم نداشتند (They said they were drug smugglers but they didn't have the money for a soft rope)*, Sep. 14, 2024, Iran Wire, <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/133899-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%88%DA%86%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%A7%DA%86%D8%A7%D9%82%DA%86%DB%8C-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%BE%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%86%D8%B1%D9%85-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AF/>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Collins, *South Carolina executes second man by firing squad in 5 weeks*, AP, Apr. 11, 2025 <https://apnews.com/article/firing-squad-execution-south-carolina-mikal-mahdi-25466963350812080385524ccc3a9298>; Chiara Eisner, *A firing squad tried to shoot a prisoner in the heart. They missed, autopsy indicates*, NPR, May 8, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/08/nx-s1-5389846/firing-squad-south-carolina-death-penalty-execution>.

destroyed his liver and pancreas, but that largely missed his heart. Mr. Mahdi remained conscious while his heart pumped blood from his wounds into his chest cavity.”¹⁵

IV. Nitrogen hypoxia/asphyxiation

17. Some jurisdictions in the United States carry out executions by nitrogen hypoxia/asphyxiation.
18. This method forces a prisoner to breathe pure nitrogen through a fitted mask, premised on the theory that replacing ambient air with nitrogen causes loss of consciousness within seconds and death within minutes due to lack of oxygen. In practice, however, this method of execution is not as quick and painless as its proponents suggest. First, oxygen can seep into the mask, which can prolong the execution and leave the person in a vegetative state. Second, as Dr. Philip E. Bickler (MD, PhD) and Dr. Michael S. Lipnick (MD) explained in a May 2024 viewpoint article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in May 2024,¹⁶ human studies on hypoxia have all involved voluntary exposures to such environments. Such experiments are significantly different from the forced withdrawal of oxygen in the context of an execution.
19. Kenneth Smith was the first person to be executed using nitrogen gas on 25 January 2024.¹⁷ Once Alabama officials commenced the execution, it took approximately 27 minutes for the time of death to be recorded. As reported in Bickler & Lipnick, Mr. Smith’s spiritual advisor described Mr. Smith as “popping up in the gurney repeatedly, gasping and convulsing, while the nitrogen was being administered” and that it was “*the most horrible thing [he has] ever seen.*” In October 2025, Alabama executed Anthony Boyd using the same method, and the procedure caused “him to gasp for an extended period of time,” with witnesses describing him convulsing and heaving for about 15 minutes.¹⁸ A journalist counted Mr. Boyd gasping for air more than 225 times.¹⁹ The same spiritual advisor reported that “Mr. Boyd’s execution had ‘made Kenny’s look tame.’”²⁰

V. Electrocutation

20. Some jurisdictions in the United States authorize execution by electrocution. In a typical procedure, prison authorities blindfold the person, shave them and strap them to a chair, attach a moistened skullcap-shaped electrode to the scalp and forehead, and attach another electrode

¹⁵ *Mahdi v. Stirling*, 2025-000491, State of South Carolina in the Supreme Court, “Status Report and Notice of Botched Execution,” May 8, 2025, 1, <https://static.foxnews.com/foxnews.com/content/uploads/2025/05/2025-05-08-status-report-re-botched-execution.pdf>.

¹⁶ Bickler PE and Lipnick MS (2024). *Evidence Against Use of Nitrogen for the Death Penalty*. *JAMA*. 331(24): 2075-2076, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2819295>.

¹⁷ The state of Alabama had previously sought to execute Mr Smith via lethal injection in 2022 but failed after being unable to find a suitable vein to inject the lethal drugs into (see paragraph 9 above).

¹⁸ Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, *Lengthy Execution by Nitrogen Gas in Alabama Renews Concerns Over Method*, *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/24/us/alabama-nitrogen-execution-anthony-boyd.html?unlocked_article_code=1.OIA.2vg4.NQ_3_6iSDJxD&smid=url-share.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

to a shaved portion of the leg, and then administer a series of high-voltage, high-current jolts until the person dies.²¹

21. Despite its historical adoption as a purportedly more humane alternative to hanging, detailed accounts describe extreme physiological trauma including violent limb movements, dislocations or fractures, defecation, urination, vomiting of blood, skin swelling and rupture, third-degree burns, and in some cases combustion, with postmortems finding brain tissue appearing “cooked.”²² The supreme courts of Georgia (2001) and Nebraska (2008) have ruled that the use of the electric chair violates their state constitutional prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment.²³ The last known execution by electrocution took place in 2020 in the state of Tennessee.²⁴

VI. Crucifixion

22. Iran and Saudi Arabia authorize but rarely use crucifixion as a method of execution.
23. Historical sources suggest that the process of crucifixion might take days to result in death, depending on the method used and other circumstances. Typically, a person subjected to crucifixion died from multifactorial causes, including the effects of scourging and maiming, hemorrhage, dehydration leading to hypovolemic shock and pain, and progressive asphyxia due to impaired respiratory movement.²⁵
24. Iranian authorities reportedly authorize execution by crucifixion:

In execution by hanging, the prisoner will be hung on a hanging truss which should look like a cross, while his (her) back is toward the cross, and (s)he faces the direction of Mecca, and his (her) legs are vertical and distant from the ground. Then the convict is left in that position for 3 days while the guards and the police watch him (her). After the 3rd day, (s)he is dismounted from hanging pole. If (s)he is diseased, (s)he will be buried after religious burial rituals, but if still alive, (s)he will be released and if medical treatment is needed such treatments are allowed.²⁶

²¹ Death Penalty Information Center, “Execution Method Descriptions,” accessed Feb. 25, 2025,

<https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/methods-of-execution/description-of-each-method>.

²² Ibid.; *Glass v. Louisiana*, 471 U.S. 1080 (1985), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/471/1080#fn19>.

See also Death Penalty Information Center, “Botched Executions,” accessed Feb. 24, 2026,

<https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/executions/botched-executions> (providing details of a sampling of 10 botched executions by electrocution between 1982 and 1999).

²³ Justice 360, Fact Sheet, “Data & Information Relevant to S 200 – Death by Electrocution or Lethal Injection,”

https://justice360sc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Justice360-20_21-Fact-Sheet_FINAL.pdf.

²⁴ Travis Dorman, *Tennessee death row inmate Nicholas Sutton chooses last meal before scheduled execution*, Knox News, Feb. 19, 2020, <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/crime/2020/02/19/tennessee-execution-nicholas-sutton-last-meal/4770745002/>.

²⁵ Matthew W Maslen and Piers D Mitchell, *Medical theories on the cause of death in crucifixion*, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. 99, Art. 4 (2006), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1420788/>.

²⁶ Mission for Establishment of Human Rights in Iran, *Retaliation, Stonning [sic], Execution, Crusification, Hanging, and Whipping*, accessed Feb. 28, 2026, <https://mehr.org/jazaa.pdf>.

25. Crucifixion is a slow, public, and degrading death often coupled with other torture methods. In May 2009, Saudi authorities beheaded and then crucified Ahmed bin ‘Adhaib bin ‘Askar al-Shamlani al-‘Anzi.²⁷

VII. Stoning

26. The laws of Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, and Sudan authorize execution by stoning,²⁸ typically for adultery and “honor”-related offenses.

27. Authorities bury men to the waist and women to the chest. Then an assemblage of people throw rocks at the intended victim, using stones that are deliberately smaller in size to prolong the agony.²⁹

28. In 2023, an Iranian court sentenced a female gym trainer to death by stoning for alleged adultery.³⁰

VIII. Beheading

29. Saudi authorities carry out some executions by beheading, and Iran, Nigeria, and Yemen also authorize the process.

30. Execution by beheading entails decapitation, most commonly by sword. Authorities typically carry out the execution in public with the prisoner blindfolded, handcuffed, led into a square, and made to kneel in front of the executioner. Executions by beheading are frequently “botched,” meaning that the person to be executed may experience prolonged pain and residual consciousness after the initial blow.

31. In 2011, Saudi authorities beheaded Amina bint Salem Nasser for alleged witchcraft and sorcery.³¹

²⁷ *Man beheaded and crucified in Saudi Arabia*, Amnesty International, June 1, 2009,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2009/06/man-beheaded-and-crucified-saudi-arabia-20090601/>.

²⁸ International Society for Human Rights, “Abolish Stoning and Barbaric Punishment Worldwide!,” accessed Feb.

10, 2026, <https://ishr.org/abolish-stoning-and-barbaric-punishment-worldwide/#:~:text=Stoning%20is%20an%20archaic%20execution,led%20to%20many%20violent%20riots>; Zeinab Mohammed Salih, *Sudan woman faces death by stoning for adultery in first case for a decade*, The Guardian, July 13, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/13/sudan-woman-faces-death-by-stoning-for-adultery-in-first-case-for-a-decade>.

²⁹ International Society for Human Rights, *supra* note 28.

³⁰ *Iran sentences a woman to death for adultery, state media say*, AP News, Nov. 3, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-death-penalty-adultery-39ac846801400d8d1399ca05f1053ac8>.

³¹ *Saudi woman executed for ‘witchcraft and sorcery’*, BBC News, Dec. 12, 2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16150381>.