



The Impact of the Death Penalty on Families of People Sentenced to Death and Other Stakeholders:

Objectives 4 (post-execution practices) and 5 (other stakeholders)

Submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights

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

The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty

International Federation for Human Rights

and

The World Coalition Against the Death Penalty

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 Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP) is the first coalition in Taiwan dedicated to abolishing the death penalty and promoting reform of the criminal justice system. Established in 2003, it brings together abolitionist groups, NGOs, and research institutes. TAEDP works on individual capital cases, monitors trial procedures to safeguard fair trial rights, and campaigns to prevent wrongful executions. The organization also provides training and seminars for criminal defense lawyers. Beyond capital punishment, TAEDP advocates for victims' rights and stronger support systems for those affected by serious crimes. It engages the public through forums, seminars, and educational programs developed in collaboration with teachers.

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 responds to Objective 5 of the Special Rapporteur’s call for input with respect to information on the impact—including mental and physical consequences—of the death penalty on other (non-family) stakeholders involved in carrying out the death penalty. This report also briefly addresses the consequences of post-execution practices on family members, responding to Objective 4.

I. The death penalty results in severe mental and physical consequences for other stakeholders involved in carrying out the death penalty.

2. The psychological harms of the death penalty extend beyond families to professionals required to participate in executions. A former Florida warden testified that colleagues turned to drugs and alcohol from the pain of knowing a man had died at their hands, with some corrections officers dying by suicide from guilt.¹ A prison nurse who had to listen to a patient’s heart stop during an electric chair execution grew withdrawn, suffering nightmares that caused him to thrash onto the floor.² A Texas judge reported that 60 executions during her tenure caused what she described as mild PTSD. Most execution workers interviewed reported serious mental and physical repercussions.³
3. A member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Tanzania reports that “prison officers, judicial officers, and other state officials” experience “significant psychological and emotional impacts” of the death penalty. For example, “[p]rison officers responsible for supervising” people under sentence of death “often experience moral distress, anxiety, and emotional strain due to prolonged exposure to condemned prisoners and uncertainty surrounding executions.” The organization further notes that “[j]udicial officers involved in capital cases may face psychological pressure linked to the irreversible nature of death sentences, particularly in a system [such as Tanzania’s] where mandatory sentencing limits judicial discretion.” The organization adds that “secrecy surrounding executions and lack of institutional psychosocial support for officials involved may exacerbate stress and contribute to emotional burnout, raising concerns about the broader human cost of maintaining the death penalty system.”

II. Post-execution practices can exacerbate the negative emotional and psychological consequences of the death penalty on family members of people sentenced to death.

4. The European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR) reports that in Saudi Arabia, post-execution practices “include the withholding of bodies from families for prolonged periods or their return under restrictive conditions, as well as the systematic prevention of families from holding funeral ceremonies or public mourning gatherings.” ESOHR reports that authorities engage in these practices “under conditions of intimidation and strict control,”

¹ *New Voices: Former Warden Calls Executions Traumatic for Prison Staff*, Death Penalty Information Center, Aug. 18, 2010, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/new-voices-former-warden-calls-executions-traumatic-for-prison-staff>.

² Chiara Eisner, *Carrying out executions took a secret toll on workers – then changed their politics*, NPR, Nov. 16, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/16/1136796857/death-penalty-executions-prison>.

³ *Retired Judge Elsa Alcala on the Death Penalty in Texas*, Death Penalty Information Center, accessed Feb. 10, 2026, <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/resources/podcasts/discussions-with-dpic/retired-judge-elsa-alcala-on-the-death-penalty-in-texas>.

particularly “in politically motivated cases and in cases involving foreign nationals, where authorities often impose heightened secrecy and restrictions.”⁴ ESOHR further reports that authorities deny families the ability to know the location of their relative’s grave. According to ESOHR, these practices cause “severe and long-lasting emotional, psychological, and social harm.”

5. The Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran interviewed the families of two men who were executed in September 2025, and in both cases authorities prohibited the families from hiring an ambulance to safely transport the bodies: “Instead, authorities handed their bodies over to the families using a private car, which they were also charged for.” The Center reports that Iranian authorities’ “punitive policy inflicted on families” includes large fees assessed to families receiving the bodies of their loved ones, observing that during a prison visit in January 2026, the Chief Justice of Yazd “threatened detained protesters . . . stating, ‘We will take billions in damages from each and every one of you, and then we will execute you, so that no one dares to threaten the country’s security again.’”
6. The Center also interviewed the brother of a man who had been executed. The prison called the brother and told him that his brother wanted him to visit, and when he arrived at the prison the authorities took him to a room where he saw his brother’s corpse. The brother fell into shock upon learning that authorities had executed him that morning. He called relatives and told them, “I’m passing out, my arms and legs are not functioning.” Two days later, authorities handed over the body but upon the condition that the family could not hold any gatherings or services: “you can only bury him. If even a single person comes to your home, or if you cry or make a noise or scream, we’ll take the body back. And tell his mother than if she holds services for him, we will arrest her other two sons as well.”⁵
7. The Center also interviewed a woman whose husband Iranian authorities executed in February 2015. Authorities did not give her official notification of his death for six months, during which time she searched for confirmation of his whereabouts. She received telephone calls from unknown numbers in the middle of the night, “but not a word was uttered; they just kept mentally torturing me. I have this huge hole in my heart because they were doing this to me.” She went into a severe depression and engaged in self-harm. For six months, she went to government offices in an effort to learn where her husband was, or where he was buried. A court officer eventually told her to go to the civil registration office, where she saw her husband’s death certificate and discovered that “government agents had purposely tortured me for that entire six month period.” And when she went to cancel her husband’s identity card they demanded that she first pay 70,000 tomans for the cost of the rope that authorities used to hang him.⁶

⁴ *A year after April massacre: Families Await Justice and the Bodies Return*, European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, Apr. 23, 2020, <https://www.esohr.org/en/%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d9%85%d8%ac%d8%b2%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d8%a3%d8%a8%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%84-%d8%b9%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%b8%d8%b1-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d9%82%d9%8a%d9%82/>.

⁵ Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, “*Our Family Fell Apart after my Brother’s Execution*”: *Witness Testimony of the Sister of a Kurdish Man Put to Death*, Nov. 12, 2020, <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3793>.

⁶ Abdorrahman Boroumand Center, *One Execution, a Lifetime of Torture: Witness Statement of Serveh Mahmudzadeh*, Aug. 10, 2018, <https://www.iranrights.org/library/document/3444>.

8. In Belarus, a daughter received notice of her parent’s execution via letter one month after the execution. Authorities did not return her parent’s belongings, did not allow her to bury the body, and deemed the burial location “classified.”⁷ She recalled that she experienced additional suffering due to uncertainty about the execution date and the execution process itself: “It is very hard to realize that it had happened since my father’s personal belongings had not been returned to us, neither had we seen his body. According to the law, we were not allowed to bury it. We were neither informed of his place of burial. Hence, I still have a feeling that he’s still out there [and that he] is alive and well.”⁸
9. A member of the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty based in Tanzania reports that even though authorities have not carried out executions for several decades, “available evidence suggests a lack of transparency and family involvement” in post-execution practices. “Families of those sentenced to death typically are not informed in advance of when executions might occur, and there is no clear public procedure for release of the body or burial that respects cultural or religious practices. The secrecy and lack of information surrounding executions and burial arrangements can cause ongoing psychological distress and grief for relatives, who are left without closure or the ability to perform customary funeral rites.”
10. Authorities in Botswana do not always hand over the bodies of people who have been executed to their families for burial, and the African Court of Human and Peoples’ Rights has found that this practice encroaches on dignity regarding the prohibition against torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.⁹
11. The Taiwan Alliance to End the Death Penalty (TAEDP) reports that unwanted media attention continues after execution. In some cases, “when family members went to collect the body after an execution, the media—possibly alerted by information leaks from the prison—swarmed the scene to film and conduct interviews, causing great panic. In other cases, family members were so overwhelmed by constant phone calls from the media that they were afraid to even turn on their phones.” TAEDP provides assistance to families in dealing with the media, but due to social stigma families “still fear being exposed to the public.”

⁷ Amnesty International, “The Death Penalty in Belarus: The story of Alyaksandra (Sasha) and Natasha Yakavitskaya.” Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, Oct. 12, 2018. Accessed Feb. 25, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkm50C7zslE>. The lack of prior notification was also accompanied by the facts that belongings were not returned; she was not allowed to bury the body; and the burial place was withheld as classified information.

⁸ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *Children of Parents Sentenced to Death or Executed: 17th World Day Against the Death Penalty: In Their Own Words*, 10 Oct. 2019, at 9, https://worldcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WD2019Temoignages_EN-1.pdf.

⁹ The Advocates for Human Rights, the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, and DITSHWANELO—The Botswana Centre for Human Rights, *Botswana’s Compliance with the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment: Suggested List of Issues Prior to Reporting Relating to the Death Penalty*, 13 Jan. 2025, ¶ 17, <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/Botswana%20CAT%20LOIPR%20Final.pdf>.