

Parliamentarians for Global Action – Roundtable on the Abolition of the Death Penalty

HC Opening Remarks

- Madam Speaker, Honourable Members, representatives of government, members of the international community, Ladies and Gentlemen
- It gives me great pleasure to speak to you this afternoon at the opening of the Parliamentarians for Global Action Roundtable on the Abolition of the Death Penalty.
- As you will know, the UK Government stands firm in its opposition to the use of the death penalty, 50 years after the last execution took place in the UK.
- Working towards global abolition is an important part of our broader work on protecting and promoting human rights throughout the world.
- We do this for three reasons:
- Firstly, we believe that the death penalty undermines human dignity and violates the right to life, the most basic of all human rights.
- Secondly, there is no evidence that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to crime - Numerous academic studies have failed to establish that execution is a stronger deterrent than the prospect of a long prison sentence. For example, in the US, murder rates are highest in those southern States that execute the most people.
- And thirdly, all countries – whether they maintain the death penalty or not – must acknowledge that any miscarriage of justice leading to the imposition of the death penalty is irreversible and irreparable.
- The UK's campaign for death penalty abolition around the world has three overarching goals:
- To increase the number of abolitionist countries, or countries with a moratorium on the use of the death penalty
- To restrict the use of the death penalty in those countries that retain it on the statute books
- And to ensure EU minimum standards are met in countries which retain the death penalty. These include the rights to fair trial and the non-execution of juveniles.
- We are not alone in these efforts. 138 countries, including 16 African Union members, have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. In the Great Lakes region this includes Rwanda, whose Parliament demonstrated strong leadership by voting to abolish the death penalty in 2007 as an important part of the justice process following the 1994 genocide.
- And the international trend towards abolition of the death penalty received strong support in December 2014 in the largest ever UN General Assembly vote in favour of establishing a worldwide moratorium. 117 out of 193 UN member states voted in favour of the

resolution. Uganda abstained in the vote for the first time, having previously voted against the Resolution.

- In Uganda today, the law still provides for numerous offences that carry the death penalty: whether under the penal code, anti-terrorism legislation or the Uganda People's Defence Force Act. Many of these offences carry a mandatory death penalty sentence.
- However, I am pleased to recognise that a series of progressive rulings in the Supreme Court of Uganda have created a *de facto* moratorium on the use of the death penalty. As a result, an execution has not been carried out in Uganda since 1999. Most significantly, the Supreme Court has ruled that the mandatory imposition of capital punishment is unconstitutional because it does not allow the Court to take into account individual mitigating circumstances.
- For a number of years the UK has been working with local and international NGOs to support the de facto moratorium on the death penalty and to work towards its eventual abolition.
- This work has included support on the implementation of the Supreme Court's rulings, ensuring minimum standards are met, and encouraging public and parliamentary debate on the abolition of the death penalty. Today's roundtable is an excellent example of that.
- We are currently providing support to the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI), working with members of this house, including Honourable Alice Alaso and Honourable Fox Odoi, to support debate around the Revision (Penalties in Criminal Matters) Amendment Bill 2013 which seeks to remove the mandatory death penalty from the statute books, in line with the Supreme Court Rulings.
- I was delighted to see that the Bill was published in the parliamentary gazette last week and I would like to take this opportunity today to encourage Madam Speaker to ensure this important piece of legislation is expeditiously brought to the floor of the house. I also encourage members of all parties to support the Bill and engage in the parliamentary debate.
- And of course, the UK is proud to support the activity of Parliamentarians for Global Action. PGA plays a vital role in promoting peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law around the world. This afternoon's roundtable is an excellent example of the dialogue that PGA promotes between parliaments on crucial issues.
- I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge ahead. Despite significant progress in Uganda, the fact remains that death sentences continue to be given. According to Death Penalty Worldwide, there are almost 300 prisoners currently facing the death sentence in Uganda.
- Of course, one of the main barriers to global abolition is widespread public support for retaining the death penalty in many countries, including Uganda. I am pleased that your deliberations today will consider how to address misconceptions about the death penalty within society. In this respect, parliamentarians have a crucial role to play.
- I wish you an afternoon of open, honest and lively debate on this important issue. Thank you