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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Sikh Human Rights Group, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[28 January 2025]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Abolishing the Death Penalty: A Universal Call for Justice, Equality, and Compassion

Recognition of Ongoing Efforts

The Sikh Human Rights Group commends the Human Rights Council and its member states for their enduring commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights as articulated in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. The adoption of pivotal resolutions, including 26/2 and 54/35, reflects an evolving global consensus towards abolishing capital punishment. Similarly, instruments such as the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) embody the collective aspiration to eliminate this inhumane practice.

Yet, despite significant progress, the death penalty remains prevalent in many nations, often applied in ways that contravene principles of justice, equality, and human dignity. Its continued use is incompatible with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and undermines the fundamental values shared by the global community and embodied in Sikh teachings.

This statement addresses the moral, practical, and philosophical imperatives for abolishing the death penalty and demonstrates how Sikh principles align with United Nations advocacy for justice and human rights.

The Death Penalty: A Violation of Human Dignity and Rights

The death penalty infringes on the most basic of human rights, the right to life, as enshrined in Article 3 of the UDHR and Article 6 of the ICCPR. Furthermore, its irreversible nature, combined with the documented prevalence of wrongful convictions, raises serious concerns about the fallibility of justice systems worldwide.

From a Sikh perspective, life is sacred and should be preserved under all circumstances. The Guru Granth Sahib emphasises the divine presence in all human beings, teaching that life is a precious gift from the Creator. The arbitrary and disproportionate application of the death penalty, often targeting marginalised and vulnerable communities, violates this principle of universal equality and highlights systemic injustices within judicial systems.

Justice Rooted in Rehabilitation, Not Retribution

Sikh philosophy is deeply rooted in forgiveness, rehabilitation, and compassion. The founder of GurSikhi, Guru Nanak Dev Ji's teachings, emphasise that humans lack the capacity to fully comprehend the complexities of another's actions or potential for redemption. Justice, therefore, should seek to heal and reform rather than destroy.

This perspective was exemplified in the governance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh who reigned from 1808 -1839, who abolished the death penalty within his kingdom. His actions reflect a forward-thinking approach to justice, predicated on the principles of compassion and the sanctity of life, values that resonate with modern international human rights standards.

Studies reinforce the ineffectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent compared to life imprisonment. For instance, countries where executions are widespread, continue to face high rates of violent crime, including terrorism and premeditated murder. Evidence suggests that justice systems focused on addressing the underlying causes of crime, poverty, mental health, systemic inequities, yield more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Mental Health and the Death Penalty

The application of the death penalty is particularly egregious when imposed on individuals with mental health conditions or those lacking the capacity to fully comprehend their actions. Many on death row have experienced severe trauma, suffer from mental illnesses, or lack access to adequate legal representation. Sikh teachings advocate for compassion towards the vulnerable and call for societal systems that prioritise support and rehabilitation over punishment.

The death penalty does not deter those who act out of desperation, impaired judgement, or diminished capacity. Addressing mental health issues through systemic support and treatment is not only more humane but also more effective in preventing recidivism.

Equality and Non-Discrimination in Justice

The Sikh principle of sarbat da bhala, the welfare of all, calls for justice systems that are fair, equitable, and free from bias. Yet, the application of the death penalty disproportionately impacts individuals from marginalised communities, exacerbating inequalities and perpetuating cycles of discrimination.

The United Nations has highlighted these disparities, in the UN Press Release, "Death Penalty Disproportionately Affects the Poor, UN Rights Experts Warn" (OHCHR 2017). It was noted that socio-economic disadvantage, racial bias, and inadequate legal representation frequently determine who faces capital punishment. Abolishing the death penalty is a crucial step towards addressing these systemic inequities and upholding the principle of equality before the law.

Alignment with Sikh Teachings and the United Nations Advocacy

The Sikh Human Rights Group position is based on Sikh teaching of compassion, justice, and the sanctity of life which also aligns closely with the United Nations' global advocacy for the abolition of capital punishment. UN resolutions, such as A/RES/63/168 and A/HRC/54/L.34, call for a moratorium on executions as a critical step towards eliminating the death penalty altogether. These efforts mirror Sikh teachings, which emphasise rehabilitation, forgiveness, and the preservation of human dignity.

Call to Action

The Sikh Human Rights Group urges the Human Rights Council, member states, and civil society to take decisive action to end the death penalty by:

1. **Implementing a Global Moratorium:** Establishing a global moratorium on executions as a pathway towards complete abolition, in accordance with UN resolutions.
2. **Prioritising Restorative Justice:** Promoting justice systems that emphasise rehabilitation over retribution, with a focus on addressing the root causes of crime.
3. **Ensuring Equality in Justice Systems:** Addressing the discriminatory application of the death penalty, ensuring equal access to legal representation and justice.
4. **Strengthening Mental Health Support:** Providing systemic support for individuals with mental health conditions to prevent punitive and unjust sentencing.
5. **Facilitating International Collaboration:** Encouraging the exchange of best practices among nations, NGOs, and international organisations to advance the abolition of capital punishment.

Conclusion

The abolition of the death penalty is a moral, practical, and philosophical imperative. It offers an opportunity to uphold the sanctity of life, advance global human rights, and create justice systems that reflect compassion and fairness.

By embracing principles rooted in equality, rehabilitation, and respect for human dignity, member states can honour both United Nations values and Sikh teachings. Together, we can forge a future where justice heals rather than harms, fostering a world that upholds the inherent value of every human life.
