

ROCKY MYERS

THE RIGHT TO LIFE

MUST BE PROTECTED

WRITE  
FOR  
RIGHTS

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



USA



## WRITE FOR RIGHTS

MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF WRITING  
LETTERS THAT CHANGE LIVES

When just a handful of people unite behind someone, the results can be amazing.

Some 20 years ago, a small group of activists in Poland ran a 24-hour letter-writing marathon. Over the following years, the idea spread. Today, Write for Rights is the world's biggest human rights event.

From 2,326 letters in 2001 to more than 5.3 million letters, tweets, petition signatures and other actions in 2022, people the world over have used the power of their words to unite behind the idea that geography is no barrier to solidarity. Together, these individuals have helped transform the lives of more than 100 people over the years, freeing them from torture, harassment or unjust imprisonment.

Once again, this year's campaign features people from around the world, all connected because their human rights have been violated. Some by their governments, others by the police, or even big corporations. All because of who they are or because they simply exercised their rights. Together, we can fight for their rights. Through Write for Rights, they will receive personalized messages of solidarity from thousands of people across the globe. The awareness that their situations are gaining public attention offers reassurance to them and their families that they are not forgotten. And by writing directly to the authorities to demand they take immediate action to remedy injustice we can create a more just and equal world.

Alongside the letter-writing actions, Amnesty International speaks to those who have the power to change these people's situations, such as politicians in their countries. Write for Rights also gives visibility to these injustices through public events, and garners international attention on social media.

Individuals and groups featured in the campaign in previous years report the difference that these actions make, and often describe the strength they derive from knowing that so many people care about them.

Often, there is a noticeable change in the treatment of these individuals, and of other people and groups in a similar situation, by the country's authorities. Charges may be dropped and people released from detention. People are treated more humanely, and new laws or regulations addressing the injustice are introduced.

*"From the bottom of my heart, this campaign has kept me alive, it's what has stopped them from killing me because they know that you are there"*

**Jani Silva,**  
environmental defender, 2021

## BEFORE YOU START

This human rights education activity can take place in a variety of online or offline settings, such as a school classroom, a community group, a family or an activist group. As a facilitator, you can adapt the activity to best suit the context and group you are working with. For example, you may want to consider what knowledge the group already has about the issues discussed, the size of your group and how to best organize the activity to allow for active participation, the physical setting of your activity, delivering it in-person or online, and any limitations. When participants want to take action on a case, discuss whether it is safe for them to do so.

The activities are all based on **participatory learning methods** in which learners are not merely presented with information; they explore, discuss, analyse and question issues relating to the cases. This methodology allows participants to:

DEVELOP key competencies and skills

FORM their own opinions, raise questions and gain a deeper understanding of the issues presented

TAKE CONTROL of their learning, and shape discussions according to their interests, abilities and concerns

HAVE THE SPACE required for them to engage emotionally and develop their own attitudes.



Letter writing event in Antwerp, Belgium, for Write for Rights 2022.

Read about the people we're fighting for:  
[amnesty.org.au/campaigns/write-for-rights/](https://www.amnesty.org.au/campaigns/write-for-rights/)

Get in touch with us at

[communityorganising@amnesty.org.au](mailto:communityorganising@amnesty.org.au)

Tweet your support to  
[@AmnestyOz](https://twitter.com/AmnestyOz) using the hashtag #W4R23

If you are not familiar with participatory learning methods, look at Amnesty International's Facilitation Manual before you start: [amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ACT35/020/2011/en/)

Amnesty International offers online human rights education courses, including a short course about human rights defenders which introduces the Write for Rights campaign: [academy.amnesty.org/learn](https://academy.amnesty.org/learn)

# YOUR WORDS ARE POWERFUL

## ACTIVISTS ACQUITTED

After leading an anti-government protest in May 2020, Cecillia Chimбири, Joanah Mamombe and Netsai Marova were arrested, taken to a police station, forced into an unmarked car, and driven out of the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. They were subsequently beaten, tortured and left on the side of the road. While hospitalized, the women were charged with criminal offences relating to the protest. Later, they were also charged with communicating falsehoods and obstructing the course of justice, for speaking about their ordeal. Netsai fled Zimbabwe following the attack. After featuring in Write for Rights 2022, where more than half a million actions were taken on their behalf, Cecillia and Joanah were acquitted by the High Court on 4 July 2023.



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## FREED FROM DEATH ROW

Magai Matiop Ngong from South Sudan was just a schoolboy when he was sentenced to death on 14 November 2017 for murder. Magai recounted how he told the judge the death was an accident and that he was only 15 years old at the time. Yet Magai was tried for capital murder without any access to a lawyer. More than 700,000 actions were taken for Magai during Write for Rights 2019. In March 2022 the High Court agreed that, because he had been a child at the time, he should be released. Magai is now safely out of the country and determined more than ever to help people like him.



## HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER FREED

Bernardo Caal Xol, a teacher and father, worked tirelessly to defend communities affected by hydroelectric projects on the Cahabón river, in northern Guatemala. In November 2018 he was sentenced to more than seven years in prison on bogus charges aimed at preventing his human rights work. During Write for Rights 2021, more than half a million actions were taken for Bernardo and, in March 2022, he was released from prison.



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# ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are the basic freedoms and protections that belong to every single one of us. They are based on principles of dignity, equality and mutual respect – regardless of age, nationality, gender, race, beliefs and personal orientations.

Your rights are about being treated fairly and treating others fairly, and having the ability to make choices about your own life. These basic human rights are universal – they belong to all of us; everybody in the world. They are inalienable – they cannot be taken away from us. And they are indivisible and interdependent – they are all of equal importance and are interrelated.

Since the atrocities committed during World War II, international human rights instruments, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have provided a solid framework for national, regional and international legislation designed to improve lives around the world. Human rights can be seen as laws for governments. They create obligations for governments and state officials to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of those within their jurisdiction and also abroad. Human rights are not luxuries to be met only when practicalities allow.



## THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

The UDHR was drawn up by the newly formed United Nations in the years immediately following World War II. Since its adoption on 10 December 1948, it has formed the backbone of the international human rights system. Every country in the world has agreed to be bound by the general principles expressed within the 30 articles of this document.

The UDHR itself is, as its name suggests, a declaration. It is a declaration of intent by every government around the world that they will abide by certain standards in the treatment of individual human beings. Human rights have become part of international law: since the adoption of the UDHR, numerous other binding laws and agreements have been drawn up on the basis of its principles. It is these laws and agreements which provide the basis for organizations like Amnesty International to call on governments to refrain from the type of behaviour or treatment that the people highlighted in our Write for Rights cases have experienced.

# UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS



## CIVIL RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES

Right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, right to non-discrimination.

- Article 1** Freedom and equality in dignity and rights
- Article 2** Non-discrimination
- Article 3** Right to life, liberty and security of person
- Article 4** Freedom from slavery
- Article 5** Freedom from torture



## LEGAL RIGHTS

Right to be presumed innocent, right to a fair trial, right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention.

- Article 6** All are protected by the law
- Article 7** All are equal before the law
- Article 8** A remedy when rights have been violated
- Article 9** No unjust detention, imprisonment or exile
- Article 10** Right to a fair trial
- Article 11** Innocent until proven guilty
- Article 14** Right to go to another country and ask for protection



## SOCIAL RIGHTS

Right to education, to found and maintain a family, to recreation, to health care.

- Article 12** Privacy and the right to home and family life
- Article 13** Freedom to live and travel freely within state borders
- Article 16** Right to marry and start a family
- Article 24** Right to rest and leisure
- Article 26** Right to education, including free primary education



## ECONOMIC RIGHTS

Right to property, to work, to housing, to a pension, to an adequate standard of living.

- Article 15** Right to a nationality
- Article 17** Right to own property and possessions
- Article 22** Right to social security
- Article 23** Right to work for a fair wage and to join a trade union
- Article 25** Right to a standard of living adequate for your health and well-being



## POLITICAL RIGHTS

Right to participate in the government of the country, right to vote, right to peaceful assembly, freedoms of expression, belief and religion

- Article 18** Freedom of belief (including religious belief)
- Article 19** Freedom of expression and the right to spread information
- Article 20** Freedom to join associations and meet with others in a peaceful way
- Article 21** Right to take part in the government of your country



## CULTURAL RIGHTS, SOLIDARITY RIGHTS

Right to participate in the cultural life of the community.

- Article 27** Right to share in your community's cultural life
- Article 28** Right to an international order where all these rights can be fully realized
- Article 29** Responsibility to respect the rights of others
- Article 30** No taking away any of these rights!

## ACTIVITY

## END THE DEATH PENALTY

## KEY CONCEPTS

The right to life  
The death penalty

## ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about the death penalty through practical exercises that allow them to understand why it is a violation of the right to life and why it should be abolished. Through the story of Rocky Myers, a Black man sentenced to death in the USA, participants will be encouraged to write a letter to urge the Governor of Alabama to commute Rocky Myers' death sentence and to show solidarity with Rocky.

## AGE: 14+

## TIME NEEDED

60 minutes – you may want additional time for the Take Action section.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will:  
understand the concept of the death penalty and why it is a violation of the right to life.  
recognize the power of empathy and solidarity with those whose right to life is at risk of being violated.  
learn about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign.  
write letters in support of and showing solidarity with Rocky Myers.

## MATERIALS

**Handout: Global Map of Executing Countries in 2022 (page 9)**  
**Handout: Rocky's story (page 11)**  
**Background information and glossary on the death penalty (page 10)**  
**Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) simplified version (page 5)**  
**Paper, pens, envelopes and art materials (if sending physical letters)**  
Optional: Template letters from [amnesty.org.au/write-for-rights-2023-activist-toolkit/](https://www.amnesty.org.au/write-for-rights-2023-activist-toolkit/)

## PREPARATION

Print the handouts for each participant/group.  
Read the background information on page 10 and Rocky's story on page 11.

## MORE INFORMATION

20-minute course on Write for Rights: [academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide](https://academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/145/write-for-rights-a-short-guide)  
Online course: Taking a stance against the death penalty: [academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/102/taking-a-stance-against-the-death-penalty](https://academy.amnesty.org/learn/course/external/view/elearning/102/taking-a-stance-against-the-death-penalty)

## 1. WHAT IS THE DEATH PENALTY?

Bring participants together and ask them:

**What is the death penalty?**  
**What have you heard about it?**

Take answers from a few participants, then read out the definition on the right.

Hand out the Global Map of Executing Countries in 2022 (page 9). Ask participants to identify the top five countries that use capital punishment, and if there is anything that calls their attention.



5 MINUTES

Death penalty: when the state punishes someone for a crime by putting them to death. It is also called "capital punishment".

## 2. DEATH PENALTY DEBATE

Use the Glossary on page 10 to provide the definitions of clemency, commutation and pardon. Draw a line on the floor, one end labelled 'Yes' and the other 'No'. Ask participants to position themselves along the line based on their responses to the following questions:

**Do you agree with the death penalty?**  
**Does a just society require taking a life for a life?**



20 MINUTES



Imagine being accused of something without sufficient evidence and, despite this, you are found guilty and sentenced to death. And that your lawyer, instead of filing an appeal, abandons you. Would you accept this verdict without resisting or asking for justice and clemency?

If you had the power to do so, would you grant clemency to people sentenced to death?

Do you believe all people have the right to life regardless of their actions, skin colour, income, gender, identity, nationality, disability or other characteristics?

Once participants have positioned themselves between 'Yes' and 'No' for each question, ask for a few volunteers to explain their reasoning.

Bring the participants back together and read the following two human rights from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights out loud:

"Article 3 – Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

"Article 2 – Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Then debrief using the following questions:

**If there is a universal right to life, should people still be sentenced to death?**

**Do you think the death penalty stops people from committing crimes more effectively than other punishments?**

**When it comes to the death penalty, do you trust the state to treat everyone fairly, or do you see signs of bias and discrimination in the way it is implemented?**

#### background information

Guide the discussion by including other elements from the (page 10) to strengthen understanding on the topic. Close the discussion by saying:

"The death penalty is still a lawful punishment under international law, but Amnesty International considers the death penalty to be a violation to the right to life. Therefore, Amnesty is working to change the interpretation of international law to protect the right to life. There are many people around the world who are imprisoned and waiting to be executed and their right to life should be protected. Today, you can do something to protect someone's right to life."

### 3. ON DEATH ROW DESPITE FLAWED PROCEEDINGS:

#### THE STORY OF ROCKY MYERS

Read out the passage below. Tell participants that it is a true-life story.

"Rocky Myers is a Black man, under sentence of death in Alabama, in the USA. He grew up in poverty in New Jersey and, at the age of 11, was diagnosed with an intellectual disability. Rocky is described by those who know him as gentle and kind. One night in 1991, in the town of Decatur, Alabama, his life changed forever."

Ask the participants to work in pairs, and hand out Rocky's story (page 11) to each pair. Give them about 10 minutes to read the information and discuss the following questions:

**Do you find it concerning that Rocky was sentenced to death despite no evidence directly linking him to the murder?**

**Do you think that Rocky's race had a role to play in his guilty verdict and sentencing?**

**Rocky has an intellectual disability and finds it hard to read. He didn't have proper legal representation looking out for his best interests. Does this allow for a fair trial?**

**Do you think Rocky should receive clemency? On what grounds?**





Bring the group back together, and collect some responses from different pairs. Conclude by saying that the use of the death penalty raises serious concerns about human rights. Other forms of punishment exist that respect and preserve the inherent dignity of individuals. However, the death penalty continues to be used, and is an extremely cruel form of punishment; even more so when there has not been a fair trial, as in Rocky's case. Join Rocky in asking the Governor of Alabama to commute his death sentence.

#### 4. TAKE ACTION: STOP ROCKY'S EXECUTION



Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to demand justice for Rocky Myers. You can give examples from last year's campaign (page 3) demonstrating how successful writing letters can be, or watch this one-minute video from Moses Akatugba who was freed from death row thanks to the actions of people during Write for Rights 2014: [youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r\\_c](https://youtu.be/8cU6EPY5r_c) (available in English only).

Show participants the video of Rocky which can be found here: [www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos](https://www.amnesty.org/w4r-videos) (available in English).

If there isn't enough time for participants to take action within the time allowed, encourage them to organize how to do so afterwards or divide the actions among the groups. Encourage them to be creative.

##### WRITE A LETTER

Encourage participants to write a letter to the Governor of Alabama using our [blank letter template](#). You can check out our pre-filled letter to the Governor of Alabama [here](#) for inspiration.

Tell the governor something about yourself to make this a personal letter.

Tell her what shocks you about the case of Rocky Myers and why you think it is important that governments respect and uphold the right to life.

Urge her to use her power as Governor of Alabama to grant clemency to Rocky Myers and commute his death sentence

Send your letter back to us at

Amnesty International Australia  
Locked Bag 23  
Broadway NSW 2007  
Australia

By the 31st of January 2024

##### SHOW SOLIDARITY

Take Rocky on a world tour! Send Rocky Myers your best travel postcard, photos of your hometown, drawings of where you go on holiday or places/events you love such as festivals, a theatre play, etc. Include a short message to describe the location, why you love that location, or some interesting facts about it. Some tips:

Please include visual components. Remember, Rocky has a hard time reading, so keep your messages simple and use clear handwriting. Please write the message in English or provide an English translation if you write your message in another language.

Choose postcards and words that are respectful, not trivial or with explicit or graphic content. We have some blank postcards that you can print out and use [here](#).

Avoid messages or images that focus on life, death or the death penalty.

Please make sure that your messages do not endorse any particular religion.

Send your solidarity message back to us at

Amnesty International Australia  
Locked Bag 23  
Broadway NSW 2007  
Australia

By the 31st of January 2024.

We'll make sure all your letters and messages of solidarity reach the people who need to hear it!

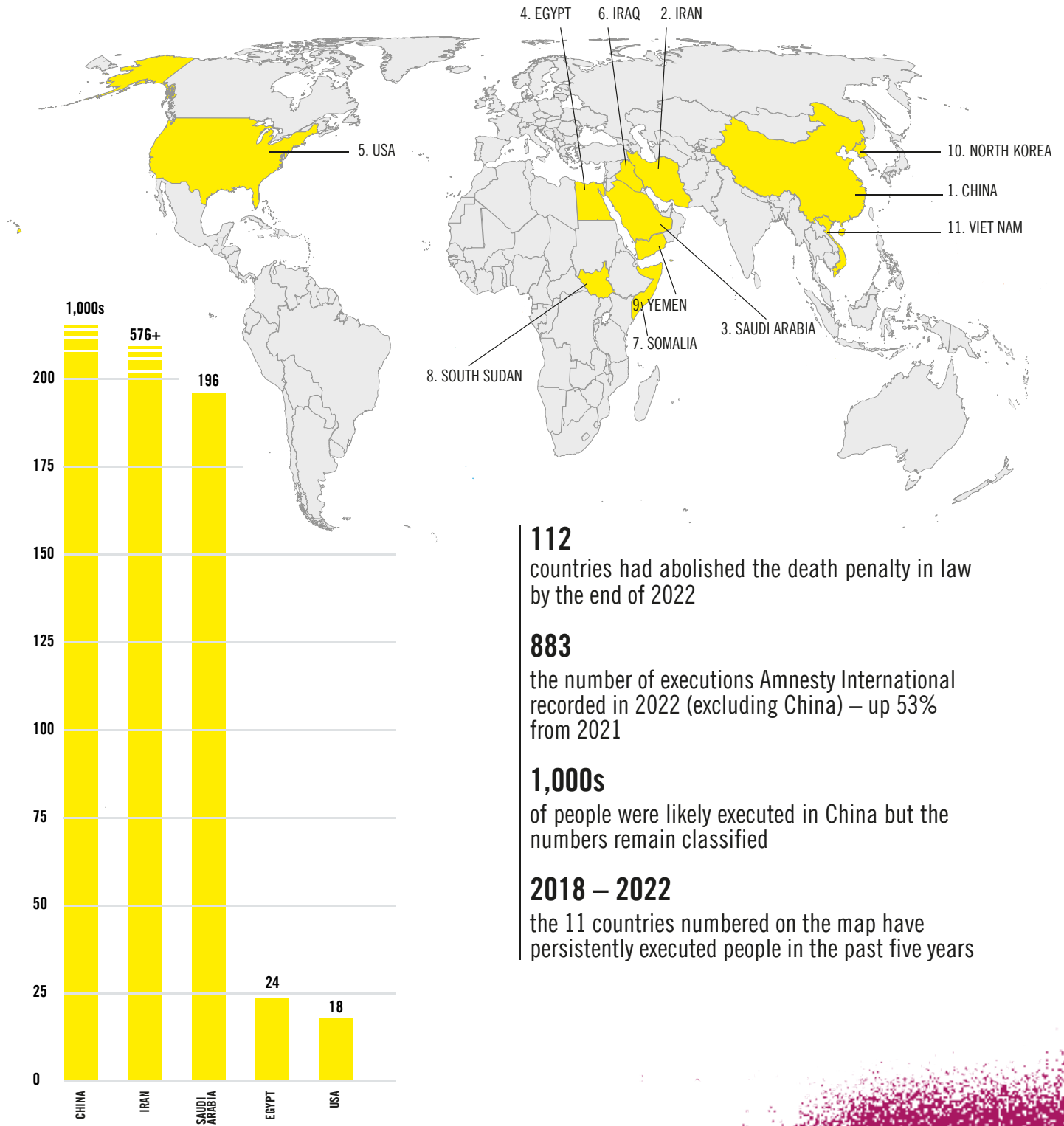
When sending us your letters and solidarity postcards please ensure to include the name and at least one point of contact (phone, email address or home address) for the person who wrote the letter or postcard. We need at least one contact method to verify that an action taker is a unique individual.

We have [pre-filled letter templates](#), [blank letter templates](#) and [blank solidarity postcards](#) available on our website here: <https://www.amnesty.org.au/write-for-rights-2023-activist-toolkit/>



## HANDOUT

## GLOBAL MAP OF EXECUTING COUNTRIES 2022



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### THE DEATH PENALTY AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE USA

Every day, people are executed and sentenced to death as punishment for a variety of crimes – sometimes for acts that should not be criminalized.

#### In some countries it can be for:

Drug-related offences      Terrorism-related acts      Murder

#### This sometimes includes:

People under 18 years old      People with mental and intellectual disabilities

#### In the context of:

An unfair trial      In clear violation of international law and standards  
People spending years on death row, not knowing when their execution will take place

The death penalty is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. There is **no evidence that the death penalty is any more effective in reducing crime than life imprisonment**. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception – regardless of who is accused, the nature or circumstances of the crime, their guilt or innocence or the method of execution.

The death penalty – also known as capital punishment – is irreversible and often imposed in cases where guilt is not proven beyond a reasonable doubt. It is also discriminatory. The death penalty is applied disproportionately against those who have disadvantaged backgrounds or belong to marginalized groups and ethnic minorities. In the USA, more than 41% of the death row population is Black, even though Black people make up about 13% of the US population. Today, nearly half of US states and two-thirds of the world's countries have abolished the death penalty, but much more needs to be done.

### THE DEATH PENALTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Amnesty International believes that the death penalty breaches human rights protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in particular the right to life (Article 3) and the right to live free from torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 5). The UDHR is a pledge among nations to promote fundamental rights as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. The rights it proclaims are inherent in every human being. They are not privileges that may be granted by governments for good behaviour and they may not be withdrawn for bad behaviour.

Internationally agreed laws and standards stipulate that, pending its complete abolition, the death penalty can only be used in cases of murder after a fair judicial process and without discrimination. When a state convicts somebody without affording them a fair trial, it denies the right to due process and equality before the law and arbitrarily deprives them of their life. The irrevocable punishment of death removes not only the victim's right to seek redress for wrongful conviction, but also the judicial system's capacity to correct its errors.

### GLOSSARY

**Abolitionist for all crimes:** Countries whose laws do not provide for the death penalty for any crime.

**Abolitionist in practice:** Countries that retain the death penalty in law for crimes such as murder but have not executed anyone in the past 10 years and are believed to have a policy or established practice of not carrying out executions.

**Clemency:** An act showing mercy or leniency by reducing or even completely eradicating a sentence; used as a general term covering both commutations and pardons.

**Commutation:** Replacing the death sentence with a less severe punishment, such as a term of imprisonment.

**Death penalty:** When the state punishes people for a crime by putting them to death.

**Exoneration:** After sentencing and the conclusion of the appeals process, the convicted person is later freed from blame or acquitted of the original criminal charge, and therefore is regarded as innocent in the eyes of the law.

**Most serious crimes:** The only category of crimes for which international law allows the death penalty. International bodies have interpreted this as being limited to crimes involving intentional killing.

**Pardon:** When the convicted person is completely exempted from further punishment. A pardon can be granted for a variety of reasons.

# ROCKY'S STORY

USA



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Rocky Myers is described by those who know him as gentle and kind. He loves his siblings, children and grandchildren, and they adore him. He played drums in his church choir. At the age of 11, Rocky was diagnosed with an intellectual disability. He finds reading hard and can't keep dates or times straight in his head. One night in 1991, in the town of Decatur, Alabama, his life changed forever.

An elderly white woman was murdered in a predominantly Black neighbourhood. Rocky, who is Black, lived across the street. Despite no evidence linking him to the scene of the murder, except for a video cassette recorder belonging to the victim which Rocky maintains he found abandoned in the street, Rocky was convicted of the crime.

Testimonies were tainted by inconsistencies and allegations of police pressure – one key witness later stated that he had lied. An overwhelmingly white jury found him guilty but recommended a sentence of life imprisonment. The judge instead sentenced Rocky to death. Overruling a jury in this way is now illegal in Alabama.

The US Supreme Court has ruled that defendants with intellectual disabilities “face a special risk of wrongful execution”. This is certainly true for Rocky. Burdened with ineffective legal representation and abandoned by his post-conviction lawyer, Rocky missed his deadline to appeal. His execution could be scheduled at any time, and his only hope is for the Governor of Alabama to grant him clemency.



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© Private

Top: Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama, where Rocky Myers was transferred after his conviction.

Centre: Morgan County Courthouse in Decatur, Alabama, where Rocky's trial took place.

Bottom: Postcards with Rocky's photo, developed to show solidarity with Rocky.

## ABOUT

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We investigate and expose the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. We lobby governments as well as other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people we work with, we mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in the defence of activists on the frontline. We support people to claim their rights through education and training.

Our work protects and empowers people – from abolishing the death penalty to advancing sexual and reproductive rights, and from combating discrimination to defending refugees' and migrants' rights. We help to bring torturers to justice, change oppressive laws, and free people who have been jailed just for voicing their opinion. We speak out for anyone and everyone whose freedom or dignity are under threat.

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