



## ACAT - The abolition of the death penalty remains a tender plant.

By Katleen De Beukeleer, ACAT-Switzerland, November 2021

**You shall not torture, you shall not kill: When countries enter a Human Rights Convention, this is good. To verify and demand compliance thereto is better, finds the Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT-Switzerland). For forty years, the human rights organization has been engaged in an effort to promote a world free from torture and the death penalty.**

“Whoever deals drugs will be sentenced to death.” This is not a passage from the Chinese or the Indonesian constitution, but rather a provision that an initiative committee wished to add to the Swiss federal constitution in 1985. In 2010 there was a further attempt for a reintroduction of the death penalty in Switzerland. The constitutional initiative entitled «Todesstrafe bei Mord mit sexuellem Missbrauch» (Death Penalty for Murder with Sexual Abuse) states amongst other things: “Torture and any other kind of cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment are forbidden. Excluded from this is the death penalty.” With both texts, preliminary review by the Federal Chancellery turned out positively; however, the initiatives fell through in the signature collection stage.

It is unknown how widespread approval is for the reintroduction of the death penalty in this country. In 2019, CH Media made a small survey and reported: “36 percent of the respondents find that terrorists who calculatedly kill should be executed.” A survey from France provided a further disturbing indicator: In 2020, 55 percent of the respondents stated in a survey by “Le Monde” that they would welcome the reintroduction of the death penalty in France.

Switzerland abolished the death penalty in peacetime in 1942. It has been deleted from the Military Criminal Code since 1992. But it is clear: the abolition of the death penalty remains – as probably each democratic achievement – a tender plant.

### **Why are there so many poor on death row?**

Just for this reason is the death penalty in the year 2021 in Switzerland in no way an outdated issue. For NGOs such as ACAT-Switzerland, providing information and sensitization remain a core task. Why are predominantly the poor and minorities on death row around the world? Why are the lives of many people destroyed when a relative is sentenced to death? Why is the death penalty a form of torture? The backgrounds are as complex as they are revealing – and must be explained many times over. The campaign work of our small team from Bern, together with the approximate 1200 members of 22 regional ACAT groups and numerous sympathizers, remains necessary and highly topical.

## **Intervention at the highest level**

Worldwide the trend is positive: every year the number of recorded executions as well as the number of countries who adhere to the death penalty declines. However, it is certainly no occasion to rejoice. In 2020, there were, according to Amnesty International, at least 28,567 people worldwide who have been sentenced to death. The number of unreported cases is estimated to be very high.

With urgent appeals, petitions, open letters, and targeted interventions, ACAT-Switzerland exerts pressure. Our members and office are used to being heard at the highest level – in letters, mailings, and petitions, we remind countless presidents, vice-presidents, ambassadors, and committees of conventions which their countries have ratified. Predominantly it involves cases of torture; time and again we call for fair trials for people who are at risk of being sentenced to death, or we demand more humane prison conditions on death row, the commutation of a death sentence – or the total abolition of this cruel punishment.

ACAT is present in thirty countries. Many African ACATs were or are significantly involved in the abolition process of the death penalty in their country. The Federation FIACAT coordinates and intervenes with international bodies such as the UN, the Council of Europe, or the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

The effort is often great and the successes moderate. But every time someone experiences an improvement in his/her situation, the effort was well worth it. A current example is the pardoning of Stanislau and Ilia Kostseu by the President of Belarus. The two brothers had an extremely difficult childhood and committed murder while still minors. For this they were sentenced to death. After great international pressure was exerted – amongst others from ACAT – their death sentence was commuted to a life sentence in May 2021.

The urgent appeals from ACAT in the area of torture and the death penalty can also be signed by non-members.

## **Spiritual Support**

Behind every “case” or “dossier” there is a person with his suffering and his hopes. This person should not be forgotten: This is also a core mandate of ACAT. For many of our members, prayer is an effective method of supporting affected persons. Others lend spiritual support with a song, a candle, a meditation, or a simple thought. Our roots are Christian, but every open worldview is welcomed. This spiritual level makes ACAT a special human rights organization which allows a space for the soul.

The “Nocturnal Prayer Vigil”, which we launch every year on the International Day of Support of Victims of Torture (26 June), is based on this idea of solidarity. Throughout the entire world, members and sympathizers of ACAT organize prayer nights, singing circles, letter writing campaigns and much more for tortured persons and those sentenced to death.

Time and again affected persons report that this comforting knowledge prevented them from losing hope: “Someone is thinking of me.”

### **Getting Active**

We would warmly welcome your participation in our campaigns, urgent appeals, and further interventions! From CHF 40 per year, you can support ACAT-Switzerland as a member.

<https://www.acat.ch/de> [www.fiacat.org](http://www.fiacat.org)