



Promoting fair and
effective criminal justice

Oral Statement: Life imprisonment

UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Agenda Item 8: World crime trends and emerging issues and responses in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice

Vienna, 17 May 2018

Dear Chairperson, Distinguished delegates,

Penal Reform International would like to draw attention to the application of life imprisonment, as an issue that is increasing at such a fast rate that the number of life-sentenced prisoners has doubled since the year 2000 and now constitutes half a million people.

In this regard, we are concerned that limited consideration has been paid to the application of life imprisonment: not least because it is a contributor to prison overcrowding and its implementation is problematic from both a human rights and prison management perspective

In many cases, it is unnecessarily punitive, especially when it is applied to non-violent crimes and does not satisfy the principle of proportionality. It often restricts one of the purposes of imprisonment, as set out in the Nelson Mandela Rules, from being fulfilled – that is rehabilitation to reduce recidivism.

Life imprisonment without parole, in particular, raises issues of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, and undermines the right to human dignity by taking away the prospect of rehabilitation.

PRI believes there needs to be a rethink of life imprisonment as a whole, in terms of its application and implementation and that is why today we are calling on UN member states to consider an update on the guidance on the sanction of life imprisonment. The 1994 report from UNODC on life imprisonment, which represents the last UN update and guidance on the sanction is now over 20 years old and does not reflect the current criminal justice standards or new correctional science.

PRI is therefore recommending *the international community through the UN to address the increase of life imprisonment and the implementation of such sentences. The 14th 2020 Crime Congress provides an opportunity for such a review of the imposition and implementation of life imprisonment, with a view to guiding member states to a system that is compliant with international standards. This can be done by specific recommendations on various aspects of life imprisonment.*

We call on member states to ensure life imprisonment is put on the agenda of this Commission, and the Congress in 2020 – as it is an emerging challenge which needs attention.

In conclusion, we call attention to a *Policy Briefing: Life Imprisonment* available at www.penalreform.org which outlines the current status of life imprisonment and includes 12 recommendations for reforming the sanction.

More information:

Download the jointly-published PRI and University of Nottingham Policy Briefing on Life Imprisonment: www.penalreform.org/resource/life-imprisonment-a-policy-briefing/

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