

Amnesty International

Group 524

April 2023



April Meeting Time Change (6:00pm) Prisoner Released and Sri Lankan Response Spring Interfaith Action Against the Death Penalty

Welcome

I hope everyone is well. Thanks to everyone who was able to make our meeting last month. We decided then that we would keep the same meeting date (3rd Tuesday) but move up the starting time to **6:00 PM** to encourage more attendance. Please let me know if you have questions or concerns. Hope to see you on April 18!

Prisoner Released and Sri Lankan Response

An Iranian prisoner we wrote letters for last year has been released! Please see the details on page 2. We received a response from our letters concerning Sri Lanka last month and is on page 3

2023 Interfaith Month of Action Against the Death Penalty

This month's focus will be on Amnesty's Interfaith Action Against the Death Penalty (April 4-21) with information and sample letters on pages 4-6.

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 6:00 p.m.

Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd.



Contact John Belch (joheb@aol.com or 412-766-1894) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA web site (www.amnestyusa.org) and Group 39's Amnesty Pittsburgh web site (www.amnestypgh.org).



A Reason to Celebrate: Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani Released!

Our Group wrote letters on her behalf last year.

Celebrating Nowruz (Iranian New Year) with the news of the release of **Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani**, who was sentenced to death in Iran for her social media activities in support of LGBTI communities. Zahra was featured in Amnesty USA's 2022 Banned Books Week Action. It was this action that projected Zahra's case file and launched global action.





Sri Lanka Campaign Response from Senator Casey

Here's a response to our letters from last month.

Thank you for taking the time to contact me regarding the human rights situation in Sri Lanka. I appreciate hearing from you about this issue.

Sri Lanka is facing an unprecedented economic crisis with rising inflation, power cuts, and shortages of essential resources. This crisis follows decades of racial and religious tension and comes amid allegations of corruption and mismanagement of funds by Sri Lankan officials. Since March 2022, the Sri Lankan people have come together in a mass protest movement to demand greater transparency and accountability from their government in its handling of the economic crisis. After a massive demonstration in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigned on July 14, 2022.

His replacement, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, took office on July 20, 2022, and quickly declared a state of emergency. Security forces have employed the extensive powers granted by the state of emergency to violently repress the protest movement. On July 22, 2022, these forces used excessive force to clear a protest camp in Colombo. On August 18, 2022, they attacked peaceful student protesters.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was enacted in Sri Lanka in 1979. Initially intended as a temporary measure, it now allows the government to detain individuals for up to 18 months without trial. Although the government made amendments to the PTA in March of 2022, many problematic provisions remain which Sri Lankan authorities continue to abuse. For example, authorities detained three student leaders after the confrontation on August 18.

As your United States Senator, I strongly support human rights across the globe and denounce the actions the Sri Lankan government has taken against peaceful protesters. Sri Lanka must respect the universal rights of free speech and political protest. The government's weaponization of antiterrorism legislation to silence dissent just stop. Since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the United States has made substantial investments in the country to promote democratic values. I condemn any repression of free speech and assembly rights and remain committed to working with President Biden's administration to ensure the protection of these rights.

Thank you again for sharing your thoughts. Please do not hesitate to contact me in the future about this or any other matter of importance to you.

I also encourage you to visit my web site, <https://casey.senate.gov>, in order to stay up-to-date on my work in Washington, request assistance from my office, or share your thoughts on the issues that matter most to you and to Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,
Bob Casey
United States Senator



Amnesty International Interfaith Action Against The Death Penalty

From April 4-21, Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) is hosting an Interfaith Action Against the Death Penalty.

Faith-based groups are invited to join AIUSA in advocating to abolish the federal death penalty and commute the sentences of two men who are currently facing the unjust and inhumane practice of capital punishment: Billie Allen and Rocky Myers.

This is a unique opportunity to take a stand on a critical human rights issue that is cruel, irreversible, and has been proven ineffective in deterring crime. By joining forces, Amnesty activists and communities of faith can amplify our collective voices and make a real impact!

We have written before concerning Rocky Myers and will include him in our actions this month. The Robert Bowers case has special significance for our community here in Pittsburgh.

Our [Interfaith Action Against the Death Penalty](#) has officially launched! From April 4-21, we invite your group to connect with local faith-based groups organize actions that mobilize your community to:

- Urge President Biden to abolish the federal death penalty
- Commute Rocky Myers' and Billie Allen's death sentences
- Urge Attorney General Garland to take the death penalty off the table in the case of Robert Bowers.

On April 4 there was an online event to kick off this action. Speakers included:

Amnesty International Death Penalty Abolition Coordinator

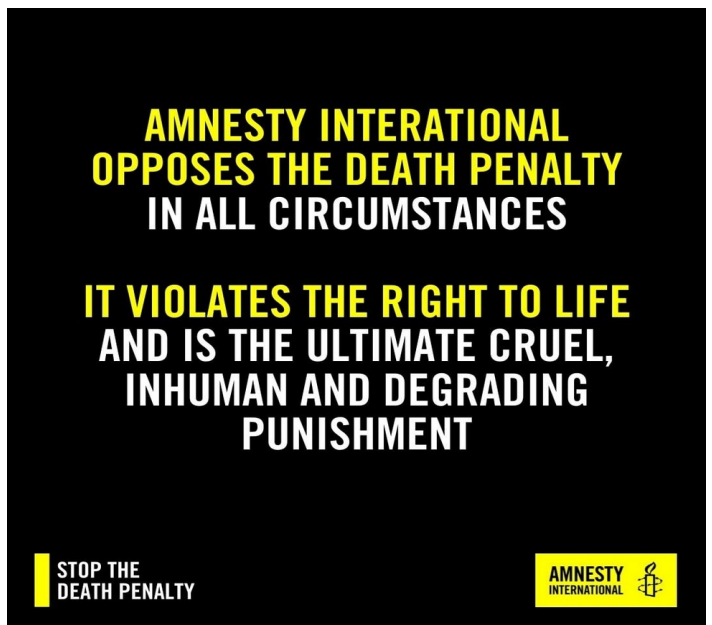
Reverend Sharon Risher, Ordained Minister and Chair of the Board of Death Penalty Action

Lenny Foster, Former Director of Navajo Nation Corrections Project and Spiritual Advisor

Cantor Michael Zoosman, Founder of L'Chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty

Yusuf Ahmed Nur, Associate Professor at Indiana University Kokomo, Member of the Bloomington Multi-Faith Alliance, and Spiritual Advisor

Sister Eileen Reilly, Religious Engagement Associate for the Catholic Mobilizing Network





TELL PRESIDENT BIDEN TO COMMUTE BILLIE ALLEN'S DEATH SENTENCE

Dear President Biden,

I welcomed the abolitionist pledge you made before taking office but am concerned at the lack of decisive action in the past two years to make that promise a reality. Indeed, your administration's defense of federal death sentences – opposing relief and moving individuals closer to execution – is reason to question its commitment to your pledge.

More than 40 men remain on federal death row. One of them is Billie Allen, 19 years old at the time of the crime. He is now 45. His case illustrates the sort of racial and geographic biases which have long been of concern about the death penalty in the USA.

I do not seek to minimize the seriousness of violent crime or to downplay its consequences on individuals, their families, and the wider community. However, I believe the death penalty is a symptom of violence not a solution to it and expands the grief and suffering of relatives and loved ones of murder victims to those of the condemned.

International law requires governments to ensure abolition of the death penalty within a reasonable timeframe. Nearly half a century after the USA resumed judicial killing, it is falling far short of this responsibility. Mr. President, you and your predecessors have frequently asserted that the USA is a global human rights champion. Just last December, you proclaimed that the "United States is leading the power of our example – demonstrating that our commitment to human rights begins here at home".

Please meet your abolitionist pledge. As an immediate first step, I urge you to use your constitutional authority to commute the death sentences of Billie Allen and all others on federal death row.

Yours sincerely,



TELL PRESIDENT BIDEN TO TAKE ACTION ON THE DEATH PENALTY

Dear President Biden,

I welcome your pledge to work for abolition of the death penalty at federal and state level, but I am concerned that there has been little visible progress on this pledge during your time in office. I urge you to ensure the federal death penalty is not left for future administrations to act upon. The execution spree that occurred in the federal death chamber between July 2020 and January 2021 showed where such inaction can lead.

I urge you to take the following action on the death penalty:

- Immediately commute all existing federal death sentences and dismantle the federal execution chamber;
- Work with Members of Congress to abolish the death penalty at the federal level, under the Military Commissions Act, and military law;
- Support a public information campaign about the arbitrariness, racial bias and impact, errors, and other realities of capital punishment in the USA, and about the global picture which has seen nearly 100 countries abolish the death penalty in the past half century;
- Actively oppose executions at the state level, and ensure that your administration does nothing to facilitate the death penalty in states, whether in litigation, before treaty or regional bodies, or in relation to execution methods;
- Commit the USA to work for an end to the death penalty worldwide and to demonstrate this commitment on the global stage.

Over fifty years ago, the US Supreme Court overturned existing capital statutes because of the arbitrary way in which the death penalty was being handed out. I believe that the federal government failed in its duty to lead the country away from judicial killing. There have been more than 1,500 executions since *Furman v. Georgia* was decided in 1972, and the evidence of arbitrariness, discrimination and error in the U.S. capital justice system has never been more apparent. Additionally, the US Supreme Court in its recent rulings has shown a tendency to choose finality over fairness, even when questions of innocence are at hand. Thus your leadership is all the more vital.

I urge you to act on your abolitionist promise by immediately commuting all federal death sentences. The example against the death penalty set by your administration must be clear, direct and effective from now on.

Yours sincerely,