



STATEMENT - 24 June 2026

Two Decades Later: The Philippines Celebrates the 20th Anniversary of Death Penalty Abolition

MANILA – Today marks 20 years since the Philippines abolished the death penalty, a historic milestone for the nation as the first Southeast Asian country to legally end capital punishment and ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the international treaty abolishing the death penalty in the world. The Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN) commends this enduring achievement and urges the Philippines to maintain its unwavering commitment to the spirit of abolition despite attempts to reintroduce capital punishment.

First Southeast Asian Country to Abolish the Death Penalty

On 24 June 2006, Republic No. Act 9346, or An Act Prohibiting the Imposition of the Death Penalty in the Philippines, was enacted, abolishing the death penalty in the Philippines. A year later, the country signed on to the Second Optional Protocol.¹ The abolition of the death penalty not only protected the country's most vulnerable citizens from irreversible judicial errors, but also granted the Philippines the moral authority to successfully advocate for the lives of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) facing death row abroad, a recent example being Mary Jane Veloso, a human trafficking victim who narrowly escaped execution in Indonesia.

The Philippines first abolished the death penalty in 1987, setting a historic precedent as the first Asian country to do so. However, it was reintroduced in 1993 for 46 different offenses during President Fidel Ramos's administration in an attempt to mitigate the rising crime rates in the country. Following a brief resumption of capital punishment in 1999, former President Estrada

¹ Parliamentarians for Global Action, *Philippines and the Death Penalty*.
<https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/adp/phl.html>

instituted an execution moratorium in 2000, which was then continued by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who signed the law and commuted all death sentences to life imprisonment.²

What has Happened Since?

Despite a long history of abolition, the Philippines has faced repeated legislative attempts to reinstate the death penalty, often fueled by populist rhetoric and "tough on crime" agendas especially under President Rodrigo Duterte's tenure and his "war on drugs" campaign. In 2017, a bill to reintroduce the death penalty for serious drug-related offenses was passed in the House of Representatives, but stalled in the Senate. Following this, there were several other efforts to reintroduce capital punishment, despite local resistance by human rights groups and citizens.³

Duterte's campaign did not stop at the legislative level, he spearheaded a brutal crackdown that involved extrajudicial killings upon alleged "criminals" and those involved in the drug trade, majority of them being from poor and marginalised communities.⁴ The exact number of lives lost between 2016 and 2022 is unknown: Philippine police cite up to 7,000 deaths, while the International Criminal Court (ICC), Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimate fatalities to be as high as 30,000.⁵

ADPAN views these attempts to restore capital punishment as inextricably linked to the climate of impunity seen during the "War on Drugs." State-sanctioned violence, whether through judicial execution or extrajudicial killing, fails to address the root causes of crime.

In 2018, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) conducted a first-of-its-kind national survey showing that only 33% or less of Filipinos favoured the death penalty for illegal drug offenses. This groundbreaking study served as a critical counterargument to official claims regarding the popularity of capital punishment in the country.⁶

² Parliamentarians for Global Action, *Philippines and the Death Penalty*.
<https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/adp/phl.html>

³ Parliamentarians for Global Action, *Philippines and the Death Penalty*.
<https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/adp/phl.html>

⁴ Since taking office in 2016 till 2022, President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" led to thousands of extrajudicial killings, primarily devastating poor urban communities. This campaign of state-sanctioned violence mirrored policies from his 22-year tenure as Mayor of Davao City. Due to his administration's role in inciting these killings, Duterte was arrested in March 2025 and transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, where he now faces charges of murder as a crime against humanity.

⁵ Rahn (2026). *ICC says Philippines' Duterte to face trial over drugs war*. DW.
<https://www.dw.com/en/icc-says-ex-philippines-president-rodrigo-duterte-can-stand-trial-over-war-on-drug/s/a-76918608>

⁶ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *Philippines' Major Setback as Abolitionist Leader in South-East Asia*. (2020).
<https://worldcoalition.org/philippines-major-setback-as-abolitionist-leader-in-south-east-asia/>

The “War on Drugs” also received worldwide scrutiny due to the country’s status as a state-party to the ICCPR. Notable interventions include a 2016 open letter from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Committee’s adoption of General Comment No. 36 in 2018, which legally solidifies that states-parties to the ICCPR cannot reinstate capital punishment. This global consensus was further underscored in July 2019 when the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines.⁷

What is Happening Now?

Although drug-related fatalities have decreased under the current administration of President Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr., human rights monitors report that state-sanctioned and vigilante killings continue to claim lives.⁸ However, the tangible value of the Philippines’ 2006 abolition continues to bear fruit in the present day. Following her late-2024 repatriation from Indonesia, Mary Jane Veloso remains detained at the Correctional Institution for Women in Manila.⁹ While civil society and legal groups urgently appeal to the President to grant her executive clemency on humanitarian grounds, her safety from the death penalty underscores the importance and need for abolition. Her case also serves as a reminder that maintaining abolition domestically grants the state the moral authority needed to aggressively protect and defend overseas Filipinos facing capital punishment in foreign jurisdictions.

As we look ahead, ADPAN reiterates that true justice is built on accountability, human rights, and the rule of law—not state-sanctioned violence.

Our Call to Action

On this 20th anniversary, we call upon:

1. The Marcos Administration to meaningfully address the legacy of the recent drug war, including holding all perpetrators to account and introducing transitional and restorative justice mechanisms;
2. The Marcos Administration and Congress to reject any and all future legislative attempts at the reinstatement of the death penalty and institute meaningful justice reform that addresses the root causes of crime without resorting to execution;

⁷ World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, *Philippines’ Major Setback as Abolitionist Leader in South-East Asia*. (2020).

<https://worldcoalition.org/philippines-major-setback-as-abolitionist-leader-in-south-east-asia/>

⁸ Amnesty International. *The Philippines “War on Drugs”*.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/projects/the-philippines-war-on-drugs/>

⁹ Beltran, S. (2025). Why is Mary Jane Veloso still in Philippine prison a year after Indonesia let her go? South China Morning Post.

<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3333226/why-mary-jane-veloso-still-philippine-prison-year-after-indonesia-let-her-go>

3. Having pioneered the path of abolition in the region, the Philippines as a state to mobilise and influence other states across the Asia-Pacific and the world to abolish the death penalty, along with other like-minded states in the region; and
4. The Marcos Administration, through the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Migrant Workers, and other relevant agencies, to strengthen legal, consular, and diplomatic assistance for Filipinos abroad facing capital charges or death sentences, and to treat their protection as part of the Philippines' principled commitment to abolition at home and abroad.

We thus urge the Philippines to embrace its role as a regional leader, actively advocating for global abolition and firmly upholding the Philippines' standing as a beacon of human rights in Southeast Asia.

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