

Iran under pressure to abolish death penalty for drug trafficking

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Several European countries cut off financial contributions to republic's counter-narcotics campaign

[Iran](#) is under pressure to end its use of death penalty against drug traffickers after facing a serious shortfall in the international funding of the country's counter-narcotics campaign.

An increasing number of European countries have decided to cut off contributions even though the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [last year approved](#) a five-year country partnership programme for Iran that was aimed at providing about \$20m (then £14.4m).

The agency's latest annual appeal document, obtained by the human rights group [Reprieve](#), which works for the abolition of death penalty, shows that Tehran has received no money in funding for 2016. The UK has confirmed in writing that it is no longer contributing. Similar indications have come from Italy, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Ireland and Norway.

Two senior Iranian officials have recently complained about the lack of international support. Last week, Iran's prosecutor general, Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, blamed "imperialist" powers for young people's addiction to drugs. In April, the Tehran Times quoted the interior minister as saying that Europeans were uncooperative.

Iran is a neighbour to Afghanistan, a leading producer and supplier of the world's drugs, and faces big challenges at home with a young population susceptible to a variety of cheap and abundant addictive drugs. Critics, however, say Iran's use of death penalty in this regard has done little, if anything, to address the issue.

"It is increasingly untenable for abolitionist states to contribute to the funding of law enforcement-led counter-narcotics programmes in Iran due to skyrocketing drug-related executions in Iran," Maya Foa, director of Reprieve's death penalty team, told the Guardian on the sidelines of the [sixth World Congress Against the Death Penalty](#) in Oslo.

Iran executed nearly 1,000 people last year, of which more than half were for drug offences. It is difficult to gauge public attitude to executions in Iran but Iranians [increasingly favour forgiveness](#) in cases involving murder. The number of Iranian convicts whose lives were saved last year after being pardoned outnumbered those who were known to have been put to death for murder.

There has been a considerable drop in the number of executions in Iran since the beginning of this year (around 200 executions) but activists said it was too early to say if that amounted to a change in policy.

The UNODC did comment on the cooperation of the Europeans. "The programme received funding in 2015 and there are pledges for 2016 from countries. It would therefore be premature to make any

judgment on funding levels for the programme, especially as we are only halfway through the year,” said David Dadge, UNODC’s spokesperson.

UNODC’s deputy executive director, Aldo Lale-Demoz, recently said: “You’ll never be able to control the world drug problem just by investing in law enforcement and repression.”

Iran has hinted that it wants to end drug-related executions. In December, more than 70 MPs introduced a bill to end such executions and officials have since signalled that Iran is pursuing the matter. Iran’s chief prosecutor said last week that “we are not in favour of death penalty and we don’t think it’s appropriate”.

Madyar Samienejad, an Oslo-based human rights defender, said comments by the Iranian judicial authorities over abolishing the death penalty for drug-related offences appeared to be serious, showing there was a will to tackle the issue. “I think this is the direct result of good campaigning. Executions have contributed to a great degree in how Iran is viewed from the outside world and the Iranian authorities seem to have begun acknowledging this, at least in their words,” he said.

Executions in Iran take place at the hands of the hardline judiciary, which acts independently of the moderate administration of [Hassan Rouhani](#). But critics say the government has failed in preventing such executions take place in public and providing enough funding for lawyers defending convicts.

Asked by the Guardian, the Norwegian foreign minister, Børge Brende, said last week: “We have been very clear regarding our funding towards the UN, and that we will not be a part of funding Iran’s programs which is related to this inhumane practice.” The French foreign minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, however, said: “The fight against drug trafficking is one thing, the fight against the death penalty is another.” He did not say whether France was still contributing.

- *The Guardian travelled to Oslo for 6th World Congress Against the Death Penalty on an invitation by its organiser, the French NGO Ensemble Contre la Peine de Mort (ECPM), which paid for its flight, accommodation and food.*

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