

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS IN RESPONSE TO THE INTERNATIONAL DRUG POLICY CONSORTIUM'S ARTICLE ON THE USE OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT AGAINST DRUG-RELATED OFFENCES

We refer to the article in the East Asia Forum dated 22 October 2022, by Ms Gloria Lai of the International Drug Policy Consortium, regarding the use of capital punishment in Singapore against drug trafficking offences. The article contains inaccuracies and misperceptions.

Claims about the Deterrent Effect of Capital Punishment

2. Ms Lai questioned the effectiveness of the use of capital punishment, and asserted that *“imposing the death penalty does not reduce the flow of drugs based on the available data.”*

3. **We wish to point out that on the contrary, there is a strong body of evidence showing the deterrent effect of capital punishment in Singapore for drug trafficking offences.**

- a. Capital punishment has deterred major drug syndicates and cartels from establishing themselves in Singapore. Drug traffickers here typically operate on a small scale based on loose associations. Turf wars, and drug-related organised crime and violence, prevalent in many other countries, are non-existent in Singapore.
- b. There was a substantial reduction in the amount of drugs trafficked, after we introduced capital punishment in 1990 for trafficking a large amount of opium and cannabis. In the four-year window after this, (i) there was a 66% reduction in the average net weight of opium trafficked; and (ii) there was a statistically significant 15 to 19 percentage point reduction in the probability that traffickers would choose to traffic above the capital sentence threshold for cannabis.¹
- c. A study conducted by the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs on convicted drug traffickers and non-drug traffickers (e.g. drug abusers) found that traffickers who had higher awareness of and were mindful

¹ Yee Fei, C. (2020). Deterrent Effect of Historical Amendments to Singapore's Sanction Regime for Drug Trafficking. *Home Team Journal*, 56–64.
[https://doi.org/https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/hta_libraries/publications/ht-journale-jan-2020-\(special-edition\).pdf](https://doi.org/https://www.mha.gov.sg/docs/hta_libraries/publications/ht-journale-jan-2020-(special-edition).pdf)

of the severe legal consequences of drug trafficking in Singapore consciously trafficked in lower amounts of drugs. In the same study, most of the drug offenders who were non-traffickers (85.1%) likewise felt that the death penalty had a deterrent effect. Contrary to Ms Lai's claim that "*awareness of the death penalty as a possible sentence*" is a factor that needs to be studied - we have studied this, and the evidence is clear.

Claims about Harm Reduction

5. Ms Lai recommended that Singapore take "*effective harm reduction measures*" to reduce the risks associated with overdose deaths and other health consequences, as there was "*strong evidence*" that harm reduction measures save lives.

6. Some countries have adopted harm reduction strategies in response to the high prevalence of drug overdose deaths and transmission of blood-borne infections. **Harm reduction strategies have little relevance in Singapore. Our drug situation remains very much under control, only a very small number of the population abuse drugs, and intravenous drug use is not common.**

7. **In fact, the harm reduction and liberalisation approaches that Ms Lai espouses, have not always worked well and may even exacerbate the harms of drugs.** Ms Lai asserted that against the backdrop of a global trend towards liberalisation, "*executing a person for carrying cannabis highlights the extreme nature of death penalty sentences.*" In illustrating her point, Ms Lai cited the example of Thailand as a jurisdiction that had recently revised its laws on the sale and use of cannabis. We would like to point out that the liberalisation of laws on cannabis in Thailand resulted in an increase in cannabis abuse and attendant problems. The Thai government had since introduced measures to rein in cannabis use, and to protect minors and vulnerable populations, including by banning it in schools and in public, and by banning sale of cannabis to pregnant women.²

8. In Singapore, our comprehensive harm prevention strategy, which includes strict laws, preventive education, and evidence-informed rehabilitation has worked well in protecting Singaporeans from the harms of drugs. Our drug rehabilitation regime includes psychology-based correctional programmes, family programmes, skills training, employment preparation programmes and religious counselling. After completing their programmes, drug abusers can serve

² [Reuters. Thailand rushes to rein in cannabis use a week after decriminalisation \(Jun 2022\)](#)

the tail end of their rehabilitation in the community while still receiving supervision and support.

9. Our drug rehabilitation regime has shown positive outcomes. The two-year recidivism rates of those admitted to drug rehabilitation centres have been decreasing over the years: 24.5% for the 2019 release cohort compared to 40% for the 1998 release cohort. In addition, between the 1990s and today, the number of drug abusers arrested has halved even though the population has increased by 80% in the same period.

Conclusion

10. In Singapore, capital punishment is only applied to the most serious crimes, including the trafficking of large quantities of drugs, which cause grave harms to abusers, families and society. All capital cases are accorded full due process under the law, and our criminal laws and procedures apply equally to all, regardless of background – race, nationality, education level or financial status.

11. Countries should be free to choose the criminal justice approach that best suits their circumstances. Governments are accountable to their own people, and must do right by them. Our comprehensive approach towards drugs, which includes the use of capital punishment as a deterrent, has been effective. It has kept our drug situation under control, and our people safe from the harmful effects of drugs. We will continue to implement measures that work well for us.