

EVALUATION OF 5TH WORLD CONGRESS AGAINST THE DEATH PENALTY, HELD IN MADRID, SPAIN FROM 12-15 JUNE 2013

BY LEEA RAMDEEN, MEMBER OF THE GREATER CARIBBEAN FOR LIFE AND CHAIR OF THE CATHOLIC COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Firstly, I must state how energized I feel after attending the 5th World Congress against the Death Penalty in Madrid. No evaluation can truly capture the morale-boosting value of such gatherings for those of us who continue to struggle for the abolition of the death penalty amidst great odds. I was unable to attend the previous 4 Congresses held in Strasburg in 2001, Montreal in 2004, Paris in 2007, and Geneva in 2010. It is clear that this is not an event to miss and I am looking forward to attending the next one which will be held in 2016 at a venue to be decided.

I returned to Trinidad and Tobago with my spirits lifted and filled with hope in humanity. As I watch photos of the “sea” of faces of those who marched through the centre of the city of Madrid to mark the closing of the congress, I know that in the end it is we, the people, who will change hearts and minds by our determination and with the support of organisations such as ECPM, WCADP and others. As the former French justice Minister, Robert Badinter, said at the Congress: “There will be no progress for abolition anywhere in the world without activists.”

I must say that the responses my colleagues and I from the Greater Caribbean for Life (<https://www.facebook.com/GCFLife>) received after we presented our papers at the Roundtable on the Caribbean were very encouraging. I was particularly pleased to see the large number of young people who attended our Roundtable, as well as individuals such as Prof Roger Hood, Oxford University, who shared his knowledge of the death penalty situation in the Caribbean region. His work on “Public opinion on the mandatory death penalty in Trinidad” (co-authored with Florence Seemungal) and supported by The Death Penalty Project, the University of the West Indies, and co-funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, is of particular importance to those of us who seek to debunk the myth that the majority of the public support the mandatory death penalty.

Kudos to the French association Ensemble contre la peine de mort (Together Against the Death Penalty – ECPM), to the Governments of Spain, Norway, Switzerland and France who helped to sponsor the event and to the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty for being a significant partner in the Congress. Kudos also to others who supported the event financially e.g. the European Union, the International Organization of the Francophonie, the Governments of Germany, Sweden, Australia, Argentina and Luxembourg, the Principality of Monaco, the Paris Bar-Solidarity Fund and the Ile de France region.

As someone who organises Conferences myself, I know how important it is to have an effective team to plan the event – particularly an international event such as the recent Congress. No one can underestimate the work that went into **planning** two plenary sessions, eleven round tables and eight workshops, opening and closing ceremonies etc. Interest in the event was evident by the fact that more than 1,500 participants from over 90 countries attended.

Care was obviously taken to provide opportunities for networking and interacting with participants at various times during the Congress. Effective planning included the ease with which participants were able to access refreshments during the breaks. The availability of various “refreshment stations” facilitated this process.

From the information on the Congress website, it is clear that each member of the planning team had clear areas of responsibility e.g. general coordination, communications, academic programme, logistics, and translation. From my perspective as a contributor/participant, the event was exceedingly well planned and executed. I congratulate all those involved in a job well done. I know that you would have had many pre-meetings: face-to-face, via e-mail, Skype etc. and these certainly “paid off”.

If there were teething problems or hiccups along the way, I am certain that we, the participants, were unaware of these. I certainly was not aware of any.

Communication is an important aspect of planning such a Congress and the organizers used a wide range of communication tools in English, Spanish and French. The Conference Brochure and Programme were of a high quality. New technologies were used effectively e.g. a website dedicated specifically for the Congress, facebook, twitter, newsletter, videos, access to web banners, trailers – all helped to promote the abolition debate.

ECPM’s Congress website (www.abolition.fr) contained all the information a prospective participant/participant/visitor to the website would need – including those, like myself, who continue to access information from it. The website also facilitated easy Registration and provides helpful online resources.

Communication during the Congress is also to be singled out. The **translators** did an amazing job and are to be congratulated for their dedication.

Members of the Conference staff were approachable, helpful and courteous. It was good to put faces to names – particularly those with whom I had been corresponding before the Congress.

From my observations, **facilities for accredited journalists** were well planned. I know from my discussions with Gail Alexander, a journalist from The Guardian Newspaper in Trinidad and Tobago, that these facilities were of use to her as she prepared 4 excellent articles for our local Newspapers and these were published on a daily basis during the course of the Congress.

I am heartened to note from ECPM’s website that for the first time, Congress reports that cover discussions, highlights and testimonies heard during the Congress will be published in 4 languages: French, English, Spanish and Arabic. These publications will do much to raise awareness and garner support from many who were unable to attend the Congress.

An evaluation of the **Congress Programme** shows that much thought had gone into ensuring that a wide range of stakeholders were included e.g. Nobel laureates, victims of crime – including those who were proved to be innocent and who had served time on death row – not forgetting the memory of those who were executed before their innocence had been proven,

offenders, politicians, activists, journalists, international civil society, Bar Associations and legal experts from various parts of the world – from both abolitionist and retentionist countries. The powerful testimonies of many will remain with me for a long time and will spur me on to continue to act for justice.

Messages from international figures were encouraging e.g. the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that the full abolition of the death penalty has support in every region and across legal systems, traditions, customs and religious backgrounds. However, he voiced concern that “Despite these positive trends, I am deeply concerned that a small number of States continue to impose the death penalty, and thousands of individuals are executed each year, often in violation of international standards. Some countries with a longstanding de facto moratorium have recently resumed executions...”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s video **message** to participants at the Congress, entitled: “Breaking the dreadful doctrine of revenge” was another powerful intervention. Like him, I am a prisoner of hope. Inter alia, he said: “Every life lost to capital punishment motivates us to multiply our efforts, to be more creative, to leave our differences aside. Universal abolition of the death penalty is not a pipe dream. It is a necessity.”

As a Catholic, I was particularly pleased to see that Pope Francis sent a clear message to those gathered – signed by Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone. As the National Catholic Register reported, “Pope Francis echoed the pleas of Benedict XVI and John Paul II to abolish capital punishment. (He) reiterated the Holy See’s support for ‘the abolition of the death penalty.’ Opposition to the death penalty is part of the Church’s defense of the dignity of human life, he said, and it is ‘a courageous reaffirmation of the conviction that humanity can successfully confront criminality’ without resorting to the suppression of life...He asked that ‘capital sentences be commuted to a lesser punishment that allows for time and incentives for the reform of the offender. Today, more than ever, it is urgent that we remember and affirm the need for universal recognition and respect for the inalienable dignity of human life, in its immeasurable value.’”

The **quality of speakers** at the Congress was generally of a high quality. Presentations from speakers such as Navanethem Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Nobel Laureates, sent a clear message to the world that we stand in solidarity with each other in this cause. In the workshops and roundtables that I attended, I only encountered 1 panellist whose delivery left much to be desired. It was good to see that the organizers ensured that there were speakers from places such as Iran and China – countries from which accurate data is not easily available. This demonstrates genuine “inclusion” by the organizers.

The **venue** chosen for the Congress, that is, the Palacio Municipal de Congresos de Madrid, was very impressive indeed and transportation to the venue was facilitated by the proximity of the Metro. The vastness of the Palacio facilitated more than sufficient space for all sessions – Workshops, Roundtables, Plenary sessions, exhibitions in the Marketplace, as well as space for refreshments and to allow participants to interact/network freely with each other. As far as **refreshments** were concerned, there was ample for everyone present. Refreshments at the cocktail reception on the first evening were particularly generous.

The **cultural programme** was well planned and it was a great idea to ensure that venues other than the Conference Venue were used. That way, participants had an opportunity to visit various parts of the City of Madrid.

I particularly enjoyed the opportunity provided at the **Marketplace** for meeting others and for obtaining valuable resources such as “Representing individuals facing the death penalty: A best practices manual”, and the Quaker UN Office’s June 2013 paper entitled: Lightening the load of the Parental Death Penalty on Children (Oliver Robertson and Rachel Brett). Such material will assist many of us in our work to educate the public in our respective countries as we seek to transform our societies and encourage citizens to stand in solidarity with us in rejecting the death penalty as a way of combatting crime and violence and of building community.

The **final declaration** is of great use as we share it with others as part of our education thrust. I noticed, though, that the declaration released after the 4th World Congress held in Switzerland in 2010 stated in the 2nd paragraph: “Noting with satisfaction the implementation of several recommendations made at the end of the 3rd World Congress in Paris in 2007...” It would have been helpful if the declaration in 2013 included such a statement – providing some of the recommendations made in 2010 have been implemented.

It is clear that the abolitionist movement is expanding. It was useful to note that the movement’s lobby is also expanding via a world network of universities established in Norway. The sharing of information such as this at the Congress brings hope to all of us.

The **closing ceremony** at Callao City Lights in the Callao Plaza was very poignant. As hundreds of us walked through the streets, I had the honour of holding part of the rope that symbolized the hangman’s noose. As I walked I offered up prayers that one day soon, very soon, our efforts to abolish the death penalty will become a reality.

The 5th World Congress against the Death Penalty did much to strengthen global solidarity/ unite abolitionists from around the world; to reinforce the capacities of various partners in the struggle; and to inform, educate and raise public awareness about the issues involved.

Once again, I thank all those involved in planning and executing the Congress for your professionalism and for your commitment to work towards the abolition of the death penalty.

As I work with others to plan a Conference to be held in Trinidad and Tobago to mark the 11th World Day against the Death Penalty dedicated to the Caribbean, I feel certain that **together** we WILL find solutions to the social ills that confront us. We will do so without trampling on the human rights of the world’s citizens.

The death penalty is inhuman, cruel and degrading. We must continue to be uncompromising in promoting the sanctity of life and defending the human dignity of each person. And while we work to abolish the death penalty, let us double our efforts to encourage nations to put in place effective strategies to achieve justice for victims of crime. We must demonstrate our love for

both our “neighbours” - victim and offender.

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