

## EU funding to Africa must be conditional on death penalty abolition, MEPs say

Written by Martin Banks on 6 February 2019 in News  
News

Several MEPs say Brussels should link the abolition of the death penalty in African and other states with a landmark cooperation agreement currently being thrashed out between the EU and Africa.



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The Cotonou Partnership Agreement between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries is due to expire on 29 February 2020 and the new agreement is currently being finalised by the two sides.

At a briefing in Brussels on Tuesday, senior UK Labour deputy Claude Moraes was one of three MEPs who spoke about the conditionality between EU funds and human rights compliance with countries linked to the EU by international agreements such as the ACP countries (African Caribbean Pacific)

and the Cotonou agreement.

Moraes, who chairs Parliament's civil liberties committee, described the death penalty as "abhorrent", saying that victims were often "tortured, abused and threatened" before being killed.

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He said, "There must be something badly wrong with any country that feels the need to have the death penalty. Africa, it has to be said, is moving in the right direction on abolition and this is positive of course. But there also need to be incentives for those countries which are still to abolish the death penalty and one thing the EU should be doing is making this issue a red line in the ongoing Cotonou discussions."

One of the oldest and most comprehensive frameworks of cooperation between the EU and third countries, the Cotonou Partnership Agreement was signed in 2000 for a period of 20 years.

The agreement covers more than 100 countries (EU Member States + 79 ACP countries) and represents over 1.5 billion people.

As part of the ongoing negotiations for the extension of the Cotonou agreements, MEPs from different political groups say that the universal abolition of the death penalty is one of the key priorities of the European Union human rights external policy and have asked the European Commission to initiate a debate on making the EU funds conditional on the abolition of the death penalty in the countries it supports.

"There need to be incentives for those countries which are still to abolish the death penalty and one thing the EU should be doing is making this issue a red line in the ongoing Cotonou discussions" Claude Moraes MEP

## HUMAN RIGHTS IN FOCUS

Moraes said the European Commission should be encouraged to strengthen discussions on issues of human rights in the ACP countries, one quarter of which still have the death penalty.

Figures presented at the hearing show that 144 countries abolished the death penalty in 2018 but there are still 52 states that have retained it, including 11 in Africa.

The meeting was told that "thousands of executions" are also unaccounted for every year.

He said, however, that this was an issue of concern in other parts of the world, including Iran and

Saudi Arabia, which carries out murders in a “particularly terrible way” and is guilty of “gross violations” of human rights.

Moraes argued that some EU members with close ties to the Saudi regime were reluctant to raise human rights issues with the country.

It was also notable, he said, that a “disproportionate” number of people sentenced to death were black people.

According to UK MEP Alex Mayer (S&D), a member of the Committee of economic and monetary affairs, “as EU citizens we say no to the death penalty and this message must be used across the world.”

“In some countries people say that the death penalty is a deterrent and it works. No, it doesn’t work because the death penalty is an act of violence and there is always the possibility of errors” Alex Mayer MEP

She added that “in some countries people say that the death penalty is a deterrent and it works. No, it doesn’t work because the death penalty is an act of violence and there is always the possibility of errors.”

The EU, she added, should make it easier for authorities to block trade, for example, to countries which still retain the death penalty.”

In her view “EU policy has never been about selling only but also improving human rights.”

She highlighted the use of the death penalty in the United States, saying that the EU had invested some €3m in lobbying efforts designed to persuade the US to abolish it.

Mayer also underlined the risk of innocent people being killed, saying that since 1973 some 153 people in the US had been released from death row because their innocence had been proven.

“The fact that the death penalty is being used less around the world gives cause for optimism, but we must still seek a global abolition.”

Referring to the Cotonou agreement, she said, “Trade policy should be not just about trade but about improving human rights.”

European states also had to “get their house in order,” she said, adding “Some bad stuff also happens here and when it does we need to call it out.”

Another speaker, German Greens MEP Klaus Buchner, a member of the sub-committee of human rights, said “In order to push through human rights it is often more effective to do it through trade.”

He added, “before the Lomé agreement, the EU had made countries participating in it aware of the respect of human rights, but it had not worked fully in some countries.”

“Trade policy should be not just about trade but about improving human rights.”

## **‘PERSUASIVE MEASURES’**

Parliament approved, in the last session in Strasbourg, a formal position linking human rights to the

support of organisations and general support to developing countries.

Parliament said it is increasingly concerned that the rule of law and human rights be respected in Member States. The adopted resolution said it is anxious that those Member States which do not respect those principles, interfere with courts or fail to tackle fraud and corruption will “undermine the foundations on which the EU has been built.”

Some MEPs say “persuasive measures” could include suspending budget payments or reducing pre-financing to countries still using the death penalty.

Human rights advocates in the EU want to expand this principle of conditionality to the African Caribbean Pacific countries that are linked to the EU by the Cotonou Agreement. These countries receive EU support and cooperate with the EU through trade and aid channels.

Tuesday’s meeting at the Brussels press club comes ahead of the 7th World Congress Against the Death Penalty which will be held later this month at the European Parliament. An exhibition of faces of people who have been spared the death penalty after many years on death row is on the walls of the press club.

## About the author

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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