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Singapore hangs mentally disabled man

Nagaenthran was 'the victim of a tragic miscarriage of justice'

SINGAPORE: A mentally disabled Malaysian man was hanged in Singapore on Wednesday, his family said, after losing a long legal battle and despite a storm of international criticism and appeals for clemency. Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam was arrested in 2009 for trafficking a small amount of heroin into the city-state, which has some of the world's toughest drugs laws, and handed a death sentence the following year.

The plan to hang him sparked widespread criticism due to concerns about his intellectual disabilities, with the United Nations, European Union and British billionaire Richard Branson among those condemning it. "It is unbelievable that Singapore proceeded with the execution despite international appeals to spare his life," his sister Sarmila Dharmalingam told AFP.

The 34-year-old was executed in the early hours, she said from Malaysia, leaving her family "extremely saddened" and "in a state of shock". Nagaenthran spent more than a decade mounting legal challenges, but they were dismissed by Singapore's courts, and the city-state's president rejected appeals for clemency.

His body will be brought back to the Malaysian city of Ipoh for his funeral, his sister said. Singaporean authorities did not respond to requests for comment. The European Union (EU) on Wednesday described the death penalty as "cruel and inhumane" and urged Singapore to "adopt a moratorium on all executions" and abolish capital punishment.

The death penalty "fails to act as a deterrent to crime and represents an unacceptable denial of

human dignity and integrity," said Nabila Massrali, a foreign policy spokeswoman for the bloc. Reprieve, an NGO that campaigns against the death penalty, said Nagaenthran was "the victim of a tragic miscarriage of justice".

"Hanging an intellectually disabled, mentally unwell man... is unjustifiable and a flagrant violation of international laws that Singapore has chosen to sign up to," said the group's director, Maya Foa.

'Inhumane'

Nagaenthran was originally scheduled to be hanged in November but that was delayed as he sought to appeal on the grounds that executing someone with mental disabilities contravenes international law. He was arrested aged 21 as he tried to enter Singapore with a bundle of heroin weighing about 43 grams (one and a half ounces) — equivalent to about three tablespoons. Supporters say he has an IQ of 69, a level recognised as a disability, and was coerced into committing the crime.

But authorities have defended his conviction, saying legal rulings found he knew what he was doing at the time of the offence. His mother mounted a desperate 11th-hour legal challenge on Tuesday, but it was swiftly rejected by a judge, prompting his relatives to break down in tears in court. In an interview with AFP on Tuesday, Branson had urged Singaporean President Halimah Yacob to grant Nagaenthran clemency, calling the death penalty "inhumane".

After exhausting the usual appeals process, presidential clemency was the only avenue remaining to halt the execution. Nagaenthran's case has



SINGAPORE: People pay tribute at a wake for Malaysian national Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, who was executed for trafficking heroin into Singapore, during a memorial service in Singapore. — AFP

sparked concerns in some quarters in Singapore, and hundreds of demonstrators attended two protests against the hanging in recent weeks. Protests are rare in tightly controlled Singapore. Without prior police approval, the only place they can be held is in one downtown park.

Vigils and small protests have also been held in Malaysia, and the country's king and prime minister had both appealed for Nagaenthran's life to be spared. A petition calling for Singapore's president to grant him clemency garnered more than 100,000 signatures. The city-state resumed execu-

tions last month after a hiatus of more than two years, when it executed another drug trafficker.

Activists now fear authorities are set to embark on a wave of hangings as several other death-row convicts have recently had appeals rejected. Another Malaysian drug trafficker is scheduled to be hanged on Friday. Despite mounting pressure to abolish the death penalty, Singapore insists capital punishment is an effective deterrent against crime. The city-state has a low crime rate, and believes the death penalty has helped keep it one of the safest places in Asia. —AFP

Zionist in deadliest Syria strikes this year

BEIRUT, Lebanon: Zionist air strikes near Damascus on Wednesday killed nine combatants, among them five Syrian soldiers, in the deadliest such raid since the start of 2022, a war monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said an ammunition depot and several positions linked to Iran's military presence in Syria were among the targets.

Government media in Syria confirmed four of the five casualties in the strikes, on which Zionist entity did not comment. "The Zionist enemy carried out an air assault at dawn... targeting several positions around Damascus," a military source was quoted as saying by the state news agency SANA.

"The investigation indicated that four soldiers were killed, three others injured and material dam-

age noted." The latest strike follows another near Damascus on April 14, without casualties, according to SANA.

The UK-based Observatory, which relies on a vast network of sources in every region of Syria, said eight people were also wounded in the strikes.

The other four killed were not members of the Syrian military but belonged to Iran-backed militia, Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said, adding

he could not verify their nationality.

He said at least five separate sites were targeted in the latest Zionist raid. AFP correspondents in the Syrian capital said they heard loud explosions.

Since the war broke out in Syria in 2011, Zionist entity has carried out hundreds of air strikes inside the country, targeting government positions as well as allied Iran-backed forces and Shiite militant group Hezbollah. —AFP

Healing by helping: Mexico's acid attack victims

MEXICO CITY: After Mexican mother Carmen Sanchez left her abusive ex-partner he attacked her with acid, leaving her severely scarred. As part of her healing process, she now helps fellow victims rebuild their lives. In the eight years since her life was changed forever, the 37-year-old has undergone 61 operations, including skin reconstruction and grafts.

"Every day I endure it but I don't know if I will heal completely at some point," said Sanchez, who wears dark glasses to cover traces of the attack. "It wasn't an accident. I wasn't born that way. He planned it, went and bought the acid and threw it at me. When I look in the mirror, I see him," she said.

Her Carmen Sanchez Foundation—launched in 2021 to "put a stop to acid violence"—believes that companionship and friendship are crucial for victims. It faces challenges such as dealing with a public health system that guarantees only limited treatment for victims, and a judicial system beset by impunity and ineffectiveness, Sanchez said.

Gender-based violence is a major problem in Mexico, which registered around 3,750 murders of women in 2021, of which about 1,000 were classified as femicides. The foundation has documented 31 acid attacks against women since 2001, of whom six died.

The crime is on the rise, with seven cases in 2021, compared with two on average in previous years, according to the group, whose goal is for victims to regain some enjoyment of life. "The moments of leisure, the celebration of important dates, going out to eat or simply talking on the phone is a fundamental part of what can keep them on their feet," said its co-president Ximena Canseco.

'Remember forever'

Sanchez, who has two daughters, reported her abusive ex-partner three times but he escaped punishment and sprayed acid in her face in 2014 after she left him. "He told me that he was going to do something to me that I would remember forever," she said. Sanchez spent eight months in a public hospital, after which she relied on private doctors who treat victims free of charge.

At the public hospital, "they told me I could live with my scars" and to "be thankful I survived," she said. After the police failed to arrest her ex-partner, Sanchez tracked him down herself and he was finally captured in 2021.

"I was the one who did all the work," she said. Yazmin, 34, is one of eight women whom



MEXICO CITY: Ximena Canseco, vice-president of the Carmen Sanchez Foundation, which helps and protects women who were attacked with acid, poses for a picture after an interview with AFP at her office in Mexico City. —AFP

the Carmen Sanchez Foundation helps to obtain free medical treatment, legal advice and psychological therapy. A year and a half ago, when she was leaving her work, a woman threw a liquid on her, leaving her in agony. Yazmin lost an ear and suffered burns to her eyelids, neck, legs and one arm.

She suspects her attacker was sent by her ex-partner. "Days before, we argued on the telephone and he told me to be careful because he had a little surprise for me," said the woman, who did not want to give her full name.

'A global problem'

Yazmin kept silent about her violent relationship for years before the attack, but now she feels liberated thanks to the foundation. "We're not judged. They don't say: 'They did it to you for a reason.' You feel protected. I thought I was the only one, but I discovered that it is a global problem," Yazmin said.

Among other affected countries, hundreds of acid attacks are reported in India each year, although-like in Mexico—experts fear they are only the tip of the iceberg. Colombia, where the crime is punishable by 50 years in prison, registered 50 cases in 2021, 28 of them against women, according to official figures.

Britain has one of the world's highest rates of recorded acid attacks per capita—most apparently gang-related and targeting men, according to the charity Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI). Martha Avila, 63, calls herself a "collateral victim" of acid violence in Mexico.

In March 2017, she was assaulted by her daughter's Argentine ex-husband. "He came to attack her, but since he couldn't find her, he came for me. He said he was going to 'destroy what she loved the most,'" she said.

Despite suffering burns on nearly half her body, Avila is glad that she was the victim, not her daughter. "I couldn't imagine what it's like to have your life destroyed so young, and even more so if he's the father of your children," she said. —AFP

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