

**Speech of Ms. Tanny Taher, of the Community of Sant'Egidio from Indonesia,
during the 9th International Congress of the Ministers of Justice
for a world without the death penalty
Rome, February 22nd 2016**

Honorable ministers, Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Let me express first of all my gratitude for being here to bring the voice of many who dream for a culture of life in Asia. The presence in this Congress of high representatives of several Asian countries is a great sign of hope. Thanks for this.

I come from Indonesia, a large and complex country: we have the largest Muslim population in the world, but it is not an Islamic state. Some years ago it came out from long regime, where death penalty and extrajudicial killings had been used in a massive way for political reasons, in the general indifference.

I was part in this indifference up to 13 years ago, when I was invited by the Community of Sant'Egidio to write letters to Dominique Green, a young Afroamerican man sentenced to death in Texas. At that time I felt like I heard the gentle voice of Dominique asking for compassion and consolation. It was actually also the voice of many people who experience capital punishment. He was the one who opened my eyes on the reality of death penalty in my country.

When the new democratic era started, it seemed that the country was going towards a moratorium de facto. Our hope rose up when the first elected president, Abdurrahman Wahid, a very open minded Muslim leader, was among the first to sign the appeal for a moratorium issued by the Community of Sant'Egidio. But it did not last for long. After his presidency, soon executions started again.

What could we do? In Asia, where death penalty is still widely used, it seemed hard to change suddenly the whole paradigm. But we could intervene in concrete cases, trying to find allies, in the name of justice and life.

This is what we did in 2006, when three Christians, Tibo and two friends, poor and illiterate, were condemned to death, accused to have inspired the slaughter of about 2000 people, during an ethnic riot. The charge was clearly instrumental, they were only scapegoats.

We addressed all our efforts to ask a **fair trial**, asking support from everyone, in Indonesia and abroad. Even European Union and the pope were at our side.

It was like a shock for Indonesia: for the first time people woke up and many showed their opposition to this unjust and unhuman sentence: in tens of cities people organized marches and candlelight vigils. Not only Christians were moving. Muslims were at our side as well.

Also ulamas and religious leaders signed the appeals and made public statements. Executions were postponed several times. The struggle went on for nine months. Many people came out from indifference.

Hundreds of candlelight vigils, made all over Indonesia at the eve of their execution, show Christians and Muslims, side by side. Even the last appeal for clemency was issued by an Indonesian Muslim leader.

The loss of their life was a turning point. It opened the eyes of many people, who gathered in an interreligious alliance named Hati, that in Indonesian means heart. An alliance of hearts, despite ethnical and religious differences, to put a seed of humanity in our society.

Moreover, a few weeks after the death of Tibo for the first time we celebrated the World Day of Cities for Life, against death penalty, in Jakarta. Since then the world day is celebrated every year on November 30th, in many cities.

But there is a long way to go. Executions went on and even increased. Last year, in a few months, 15 people, mostly drug smugglers, were put to death.

Many of them were immigrants from very poor countries, clearly exploited by the drug traffickers. An evidence that death penalty is mostly enforced in situations of poverty.

Again we moved to the streets and candlelights were organized all over Indonesia. Thousands of candles were put by people in front of state buildings, in front of tribunal, minister of justice, to enlighten the dark of death sentence.

Only two lives were saved, out of 15.

A victory? A defeat? Actually every loss of life is a defeat. But we feel that the seed has been planted and it will grow.

One whose sentence was suspended is a very poor Filipino maid, Mary Jane. We are still struggling for her life. We met her family recently and they put their hope in our hands.

Dear friends, movement for a moratorium in Asia is still young and perhaps it's just like a candle. **But in the dark, a candle is precious, it can show the direction to those who are walking and looking for light.**

We feel the responsibility to be this light. We owe this to Dominique, to Tibo, to Mary Jane.

We owe this to the many poor people whose life is undervalued and even wasted. We can build an Asian humanism. Many people are longing for this. I am here to give you this witness.

Please be at our side. We will not give up.

Thank you