

Moving to kill off capital punishment

By EMMA BONINO

PRAGUE — It is finally happening. After 13 years of negotiations, delays, and hesitation, the U.N. General Assembly will vote this month on the proposal for a universal moratorium on the death penalty. A large majority of the U.N. adopted the proposal on Nov. 15, despite attempts by some member states to obstruct, amend or bury it. Fortunately, in the end, the opponents were forced to fight a will stronger than their own: the will of those who — after the abolition of slavery and torture — want to mark another turning point for civilization.

But will this December's vote be a mere formality? Experience teaches us to be prudent. I have not opened my bottle of spumante yet.

To be honest, I am not sure that all of the world's governments have accepted the inevitable, or that even the most inflexible will now agree to the moratorium. But I continue to have faith that the General Assembly will know, as always, how to meet this challenge.

We are all aware that even if the vote succeeds, the U.N. resolution will not be binding, and that establishing and enforcing a moratorium is only a necessary mid-way step toward full abolition. I believe the U.N. should push for an immediate de facto suspension, without waiting for the debates to begin on legal reforms in the respective countries. I hope that this approach will allow a wide consensus in the General Assembly, and that any last minute change of heart will fail.

One big lesson I learned during the struggle to create the International Criminal Court (ICC), and now during the battle for a moratorium on the death penalty, is that it is often better to aim for a realistic result rather than a perfect one. Before the international community established the ICC, there were two ad hoc tribunals — one for the former Yugoslavia and one for Rwanda. Their work paved the way

for the ICC.

Some European Union countries wanted to push for complete abolition of the death penalty right away. I understand their position. I would have wanted the same thing myself. But had we followed that route, we would most likely have failed.

There is an important lesson in this for the EU at a time when it is seeking to become a global actor: We must reach an internal consensus while always bearing in mind what the external ramifications of our decision might be. On the moratorium, we remained pragmatic and built a strong European foreign policy. And it was an advantage in the U.N. negotiations to have a common European position and to have spoken with a single voice.

A second lesson that I learned is also useful for the EU, which finds itself in a world in which new powers are emerging and where all actors from Manila to Algiers, from Doha to Libreville, must deal with the challenges of globalization and interdependence on a daily basis. That lesson is that Europe has more friends than it has enemies in the world.

These friends deserve respect and attention. If Italy and the EU had not understood the need to work with non-European countries, and make them feel that they were responsible and fully-fledged protagonists, the efforts to establish the ICC and be so close to declare a universal moratorium on the death penalty would have failed.

I know that this is not exactly a new lesson, but it is what I have in mind when I think of efficient multilateralism. Not only does it work, but, above all, in some cases, it is the only way of moving forward.

Finally, a third lesson — relevant to the fight against the death penalty and, indeed, to winning any political battle — is perseverance, which I consider to be a mix of pigheadedness and the ability to maintain one's position. Without perseverance, there can be no progress.

All this is a success, not only for anti-death penalty radicals, for the "Hands off Cain" association, the Italian government, and for the EU and its friends in the world. It is much more: it is a success for all those who believe that it is still possible to improve our world — and ultimately the human condition

— every day.

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