



Branson fights to save man on death row in - Sydney Morning Herald, The (Australia) - April 23, 2022 - page 22
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Singapore: For Richard Branson, the notion of an advanced country like Singapore still hanging prisoners is an outrageous proposition that may not escape investors.

The case of Nagaenthran Dharmalingam, a mentally impaired death-row inmate with an IQ of 69 in the country's Changi Prison, has struck a chord with the British billionaire and long-time anti-death-penalty advocate.

Nagaenthran, 34, was arrested 13 years ago for **smuggling** 42.72 grams of heroin into Singapore from Malaysia. He was handed a mandatory death sentence and has been on death row for more than a decade.

Now, after an unsuccessful, last-ditch appeal in Singapore's highest court, Nagaenthran will face the gallows at dawn on Wednesday.

"It's devastating news," the Virgin Group founder in an interview with The Sydney Morning Herald.

"What Singapore is planning to do is a violation of the country's international commitments to protect the rights of people with disabilities.

"Executing Nagen would be a tragic injustice and a dark stain on Singapore's international reputation," Branson said.

The campaign to spare Nagaenthran's life has cast the spotlight onto the South-East Asian nation's use of capital **punishment**, which it has resumed carrying out after a two-year hiatus.

His legal team had tried to have his sentence commuted on the basis of an intellectual disability and last month submitted a new medical report by Australian consultant forensic psychiatrist Dr Danny Sullivan that concluded he had "borderline intellectual functioning which was likely to have been causally associated with his offending".

The appeal was dismissed, however, by a five-judge panel in the Court of Appeal and this week his family in Malaysia was informed he is to be executed next week. His supporters say he has little idea of what is ahead of him.

It was in November that Branson learnt of Nagaenthran's approaching hanging, and decided to

get involved.

Branson launched a public appeal for Nagaenthran's life and, privately, wrote to Singaporean President Halimah Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong pleading for clemency.

"The response I received from someone deep inside the Home Affairs Ministry was a laundry list of unconnected thoughts on **drug** use and crime in the West and a rejection of Nagen's intellectual disability case. And reiterating the law governing the death penalty for **drug** offences, as the letter did, isn't evidence that the approach is working," Branson said.

Singapore credits its zero-tolerance policy for illicit drugs as key to retaining its status as one of the safest places in the world.

Branson warned of potential financial ramifications for Singapore if it does go ahead with the execution.

Having founded a campaign last year called Business Leaders Against the Death Penalty, he believes others could rethink their association with the financial hub.

"It's not far-fetched to suggest that Singapore's handling of the death penalty - the lack of transparency, the disregard for international norms and commitments, the harassment of lawyers and human rights defenders - is far from what you expect from a nation professing its commitment to the rule of law," Branson said.

"At the end of the day, all of us in business depend on functioning institutions and good governance. When it comes to the death penalty in Singapore, it is clear to me that it's no deterrent to crime, but it may well be a deterrent to those seeking to invest and trade in the future."

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