

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 51/191/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 318
28 November 2005

Embargo Date: 28 November 2005 00:01 GMT

USA: 1,000th execution looms as lottery of death reaches shameful milestone

A prison guard takes a man out of a prison cell. The guard leads the man through a hallway to an execution chamber and in the presence of witnesses, the prisoner is poisoned to death.

The witnesses go home, many of them traumatized for life. The prison authorities who directly participated in extinguishing a human life are similarly traumatized. The journalists write stories about the man that has just been put to death in front of them. Officials clear the room until the next time.

In the USA, this scene is fairly routine. Since 1976, when the death penalty was reinstated by the US Supreme Court, nearly 1,000 men and women have been killed by the state in the name of justice.

As the 1,000th execution in the US approaches, Amnesty International, along with a broad spectrum of human rights organizations, social justice groups, and concerned individuals, is calling on US State and Federal authorities to put an immediate end to all executions.

“The death penalty is by nature ineffective, arbitrary and does not deter crime. On the contrary, it creates more victims and demeans society as a whole”, said Amnesty International.

A disproportionate number of those executed in the USA in the past three decades were economically disadvantaged, people of colour, and those who had little or no access to competent counsel. Many suffered from mental retardation or were child offenders – groups that are exempt from the death penalty under international human rights standards. Others suffered severe mental illness. Many were executed while serious questions remained concerning their guilt -- to date 122 people have been released from death rows across the country on grounds of wrongful conviction.

Furthermore, 80% of all executions have been carried out in the South and concentrated in only a handful of states. Nearly half of the 1,000 executions that have taken place in the US occurred in two states, Texas and Virginia. New York, Illinois and New Jersey have a hold on executions and numerous questions are being raised across the country regarding the fairness and effectiveness of the capital punishment system. In recent years the US Supreme Court has banned the execution of the mentally retarded and child offenders.

“This shows that it is possible to end the use of the death penalty in the US in the near future. What

is now needed is for political leaders at both the federal and state level to demonstrate courage, wisdom, and leadership and end the death penalty once and for all.”

“The victims of violent crime deserve respect, compassion and justice. The death penalty offers none of these things. It is an illusory solution to pressing social problems and merely amounts to a failure of political vision,” said Amnesty International.

“The resources spent on these executions could have been invested in comprehensive rehabilitation, meaningful victims services, and other crime prevention programmes or even used to reinforce existing law enforcement efforts.”

121 countries have abolished the death penalty worldwide in law or practice.

“The execution of 1,000 men and women by the state has resulted in immeasurable human costs - for the victims of violent crime, for the families of those who were executed, and for those who participated in these state-sanctioned killings. It is time for the US to realize the ultimate futility of the death penalty and follow the global trend towards abolition.”

For more information, please see: www.amnesty.org and www.1000execution.org

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>