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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: 100th EXECUTION ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE IN TEXAS

As Harold Joe Lane is due to become the 100th man to be executed in Texas -- and the 301st in all of the United States of America (USA) -- Amnesty International is calling on the USA authorities to immediately abolish the death penalty.

"As more and more countries are abolishing the death penalty, the USA continues to carry out this cruel, inhuman and outmoded form of punishment," Amnesty International said today.

Barring a last minute stay of execution, Harold Joe Lane, who was sentenced to death for the shooting of a supermarket employee during a robbery in 1982, is due to be executed tomorrow. Almost one third of all executions in the USA, since the death penalty was reinstated in 1977, have taken place in Texas.

The 100th execution in Texas, since the resumption of executions in that state in 1982, will follow last Wednesday's execution of Dennis Stockton -- the 300th in the USA since 1977. He was executed in Virginia by lethal injection despite grave doubts concerning the evidence originally used to convict him.

"That there were even doubts concerning the guilt of the 300th person to be executed in the USA makes the need to abandon the use of the death penalty more imperative," Amnesty International said.

"There have been doubts about the guilt of at least three of the prisoners executed so far this year. One person has even been released from death row after he was found innocent at his retrial."

Dennis Stockton was the 43rd person to be executed in the USA during 1995, the highest number in any one year since 1977. There have been disturbing facts in many of these cases.

Amnesty International believes that the US continues its rush to increase the number of executions. Many states are introducing laws requiring courts to set execution dates for prisoners who do not have an appeal currently before any court -- although in many cases the prisoner is not at the end of the appeals process.

Although the execution of the insane has been ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court, Varnall Weeks was executed in Alabama on 12 May 1995. He had been diagnosed as suffering from longstanding paranoid schizophrenia -- he thought he was a tortoise -- and attorneys for both the state and the defence agreed he was delusional. His defence appealed that he was mentally incompetent to be executed. However, because Weeks could answer a few simple questions about his execution the judge ruled he was "competent" and the execution went ahead.

"The death penalty is a symptom of a violent society, not a cure," Amnesty International said. "There is now overwhelming evidence that the death penalty does not provide the solution to violent crime."

The USA's neighbour, Canada, abolished the death penalty in 1976. Since abolition Canada's homicide rate has dropped 27 per cent. Its 1993 homicide rate was 2.19 per 100,000 head of population, this compares with a rate of 13.3 in some states that execute in the US.

"The continuing use of the death penalty in a racial manner; the risk of executing the innocent; the execution of the insane and the continuing execution of those who have been represented by inexperienced and poorly-trained attorneys at trial, mean the time has come for the US to abolish the death penalty," Amnesty International said.

BACKGROUND:

- The death penalty in the US continues to be used in a racial manner. Almost 50% of those executed this year came from ethnic minorities. Many blacks are tried before all-white juries after prosecutors removed all potential black jurors. The death penalty is disproportionately inflicted on those convicted of killing whites. Over 82% of those executed since 1977 were convicted of killing whites -- yet blacks make up approximately half the victims of homicide.
- The death penalty continues to consume vast amounts of taxpayers money. Some estimates of the full cost of prosecuting a prisoner to the point of execution are as high as \$2.5 million. New York, when it reintroduced the death penalty in March 1995, passed a provision of \$11 million to cover the extra costs involved in administering the death penalty. However, many have claimed the \$11 million will be insufficient.
- For those prisoners at the end of the appeal process the only hope may be the granting of executive clemency from the state governor. With the politicization of the death penalty as a supposed answer to violent crime many governors have become increasingly reluctant to grant clemency. No death row inmate has been granted clemency this year.
- 48 condemned prisoners have been freed from death row since 1972 after being found innocent in retrials.

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