
amnesty international

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The human dignity that Texas refuses to recognize

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“If I was the last juvenile executed then I would be pleased with that because I’d know that what I’ve done for the last eight years mattered.” Napoleon Beazley, 27 May 2002.

On 28 May 2002, the State of Texas killed Napoleon Beazley for a crime he committed in 1994 when he was 17. Texas, and the USA, thereby violated a fundamental principle recognized in all corners of the globe. This holds that child offenders – those under 18 years old at the time of the crime – must be exempted from the death penalty because of their immaturity and potential for rehabilitation.

Napoleon Beazley was the 10th child offender to be executed in the United States since 1994. There have been seven such executions reported in the rest of the world combined in the same period. Napoleon Beazley’s execution took place in the same month that the US Government told the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children that the USA is the “global leader in child protection”.

Napoleon Beazley left a final written statement before being killed by his government:

“The act I committed to put me here was not just heinous, it was senseless. But the person that committed that act is no longer here - I am. I’m not going to struggle physically against any restraints. I’m not going to shout, use profanity or make idle threats. Understand though that I’m not only upset, but I’m saddened by what is happening here tonight. I’m not only saddened, but disappointed that a system that is supposed to protect and uphold what is just and right can be so much like me when I made the same shameful mistake.

If someone tried to dispose of everyone here for participating in this killing, I'd scream a resounding, "No". I'd tell them to give them all the gift that they would not give me...and that's to give them all a second chance.

I'm sorry that I am here. I'm sorry that you're all here. I'm sorry that John Luttig died. And I'm sorry that it was something in me that caused all of this to happen to begin with.

Tonight we tell the world that there are no second chances in the eyes of justice. Tonight, we tell our children that in some instances, in some cases, killing is right.

This conflict hurts us all, there are no SIDES. The people who support this proceeding think this is justice. The people that think that I should live think that is justice. As difficult as it may seem, this is a clash of ideals, with both parties committed to what they feel is right. But who's wrong if in the end we're all victims?

In my heart, I have to believe that there is a peaceful compromise to our ideals. I don't mind if there are none for me, as long as there are for those who are yet to come. There are a lot of men like me on death row - good men - who fell to the same misguided emotions, but may not have recovered as I have.

Give those men a chance to do what's right. Give them a chance to undo their wrongs. A lot of them want to fix the mess they started, but don't know how. The problem is not in that people aren't willing to help them find out, but in the system telling them it won't matter anyway. No one wins tonight. No one gets closure. No one walks away victorious."

Seven Nobel Peace Prize winners were among the tens of thousands of individuals and organizations calling for clemency. They included Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. In a six-page letter to the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, he wrote: "I am astounded that Texas and a few other states in the United States take children from their families and execute them... [W]hen the State executes the offender now grown to be a young man, it literally takes the child from the parents and siblings. The State forces the innocent family to atone for the death of the victim by causing it unbearable grief... As a pastor, I ask this Board to join in the world unity protecting the rights of children... Spare the child. Spare the family. Spare the community. Spare us all the degradation of the death of another child offender, when by opening the hope of a future for him and his family, you give hope to us all..."

A majority of the Board rejected such calls. One of its members who did vote for clemency said, on learning of the execution, "I'm really apprehensive that this is a day we're going to be sorry about for a long time. I just feel like something really wrong has happened."

The Governor had refused to intervene, saying that not to kill Napoleon Beazley would be "to delay justice". He chose degradation and cruelty over human dignity and hope. He chose to have his state kill Rena and Ireland Beazley's son, Maria and Jamal Beazley's brother, rather than live up to his State of the State exhortation last year, when he called on all Texans to "renew our commitment to the children of this state".

Amnesty International urges all governments and people around the world who respect human rights and international law to redouble efforts to persuade Texas and the USA to change its ways. There is an urgent need. Another 80 child offenders await execution in the United States, 30 of them in Texas. Two of them, TJ Jones and Toronto Patterson, are due to be killed in the Texas death chamber in August.

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