

**PUBLIC**

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**22 May 2000**

**Further information on EXTRA 79/99 (AMR 51/104/99, 30 June 1999) and follow-up (AMR 51/109/99, 9 July) - Death Penalty / Legal Concern**

**USA (ALABAMA)      Pernell FORD, aged 35**

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Pernell Ford is scheduled to die in Alabama's electric chair on 2 June 2000. He was sentenced to death in 1984 for the 1983 murder of Linda Gail Griffith, 42, and her mother Willie Griffith, 74, when he was 18 years old. Ford, who has suffered from serious mental health problems and suicidal tendencies since he was a child, has given up his appeals.

Pernell Ford came within a few hours of execution in July 1999 before his execution was stayed for the courts to consider whether he had been mentally competent to waive his appeals. He has now been found competent, that is, that he understands the consequences of giving up his appeals.

From the age of six, Pernell Ford spent extended periods in mental health institutions, and by 13 was being prescribed powerful anti-psychotic and anti-depressant drugs. During his adolescence he attempted suicide several times, by methods including overdose, hanging and poisoning. He is also reported to have attempted suicide on death row.

Pernell Ford, who is black, was tried in 1984 by an all-white jury (the Griffiths were white). Shortly before the trial, he dismissed his lawyers. He was found competent to act as his own lawyer despite his youth, his limited formal education, an IQ measured at 80, and his history of mental problems. The only "defence" he offered was that God would intervene at the trial and bring the victims back to life. For most of the proceedings, Pernell Ford remained silent and withdrawn. There was no opening statement on his behalf, no objections, and no cross-examination of any witnesses.

At his sentencing, Pernell Ford dressed himself in a white bed sheet, worn toga-style with a belt and shoulder strap made from a white towel. In a long speech, he asked the judge to have the coffins of the Griffiths brought into the courtroom so that God could raise them from the dead in front of the jurors. After sentencing him to death, the judge told Ford that by law he would receive an automatic appeal. Pernell Ford responded that he did not want one. As he was led from the court he reportedly waved to the prosecutor and said "see you at the electric chair."

He has periodically given up his appeals, but has resumed them when his mental health has stabilized. Since being on death row, he has been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia and depression and treated with a range of drugs.

Pernell Ford claims that since 1994 he has been able to transport himself anywhere on earth, by a method he calls "translation". He has stated that one of his first "translations" from his cell was to India, where he now has a number of wives. He claims to have hundreds of thousands of wives in other countries, including the Philippines, Colombia, Ecuador and Spain, and to have millions of dollars in a Swiss bank account, which will support his wives and children after his execution. He has said that when he dies he will become the Holy Spirit and sit on the left hand of God, and that he has already visited heaven in an earlier "translation".

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

In the past two years over 20 US death row prisoners have been executed after giving up their appeals, including two this year. On 22 March 62-year-old James Hampton was executed in Missouri after dropping his appeals. Hampton had shot himself in the head at the time of arrest, sustaining serious brain damage. On 2 May, 28-year-old former nurse Christina Riggs was executed in Arkansas two and a half years after she killed her two young children and attempted to kill herself by lethal injection.

Prisoners on death row may decide to waive their appeals for any number of reasons, including mental or physical illness, the strain of living under a death sentence, pessimism about their appeal prospects, or an overwhelming sense of remorse (see pages 24-25 of *USA: Failing the Future: Death Penalty Developments, March 1998-March 2000*, AMR 51/03/00, April 2000). Whatever the reason, none can excuse the state's involvement in the premeditated taking of a human life. Under any circumstances, an execution is an affront to human dignity and serves only to deepen a culture of violence.

Alabama has executed three of the 34 prisoners put to death in the USA so far this year. Since the USA resumed judicial killing, 632 prisoners have been put to death in 31 states. The decision by Governor Ryan of Illinois in January 2000 to suspend executions in his state because of its rate of wrongful conviction has sparked increased concern about the fairness and reliability of US death sentencing and generated growing calls for a moratorium on executions.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language, in your own words, using the following guide:**

- expressing deep concern that the State of Alabama is intending to execute Pernell Ford, despite evidence of his long history of mental illness, including schizophrenia;
- noting that the US National Alliance for the Mentally Ill believes that the death penalty is "never appropriate for a defendant suffering from schizophrenia or other serious brain disorders";
- urging the Governor to stop this execution and to commute Pernell Ford's sentence to a humane alternative;
- expressing sympathy for the victims of violent crime and their families;
- urging the Governor to support a moratorium on executions in Alabama, noting increasing disquiet across the USA about the fairness and reliability of the death penalty.

**APPEALS TO:**

The Honourable Don Siegelman  
 Governor of Alabama  
 Alabama State Capitol  
 600 Dexter Avenue  
 Room N-104, Montgomery, Alabama 36130, USA  
**Faxes: + 1 334 242 0937 or 242 2335**  
**Telegrams: Governor Siegelman, Montgomery, Alabama, USA**  
**Telephone: + 1 334 242 7100**  
**Salutation: Dear Governor**

**COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of the USA accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.**