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USA: Appeal for decency as Georgia prepares to execute a mentally ill child offender

"Are we better off today than we were eight years ago? You bet we are... But we're not just better off, we're also a better country. We are today more tolerant, more decent, more humane...."

President Bill Clinton, Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles, 14 August 2000

In the next eight days, US standards of decency and humanity will come under the international spotlight, Amnesty International said today issuing a report on the imminent execution of a mentally ill child offender.

Alexander Williams is scheduled to die in Georgia's electric chair on 24 August 2000.

"The execution of Alex Williams would be further evidence that the USA is something of a rogue state when it comes to the death penalty. It leads a tiny handful of countries which flout the global ban on the use of the death penalty against children -- those under 18 years old at the time of the crime," Amnesty International said.

Alex Williams was 17 at the time of the murder of 16-year-old Aleta Bunch in 1986. If executed, he would become the fifth child offender executed in the USA this year, more than in any year since 1954. It would also mean that the US has executed more child offenders in just over seven months than the rest of the world has in the past seven years.

"There is almost no other country on the planet where Alex Williams would be put to death," Amnesty International said. "In the past three years, only Iran and the Democratic Republic of Congo are known to have executed child offenders."

Contrary to international standards, Alex Williams, like many defendants, was denied his right to adequate legal representation. Williams' lawyer effectively abandoned him at the 1986 trial by not investigating the teenager's history of appalling childhood abuse and evidence of mental illness to present in mitigation.

Alex Williams' mental illness has worsened on death row, and the state has on occasion forcibly medicated him to control his symptoms, which include delusions and auditory and visual hallucinations. He has been variously diagnosed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder with bipolar features.

The report puts Alex Williams' case into a context of increasing national and international concern surrounding the US death penalty. Twenty eight years after the US Supreme Court halted executions because of the arbitrary nature in which death sentences were being handed out, the US death penalty remains a lottery -- who dies at the hands of the executioner depends as much on who the victim was, who the trial lawyer was, and where the crime was committed, as it does on the heinousness of the crime.

Calls for a moratorium have increased since the Governor of Illinois halted executions in his state because of its "shameful" record of wrongful convictions in capital cases.

"The US death penalty is riddled with error and injustice," Amnesty International said. "The execution of Alex Williams would be one more sign that US authorities would rather apply a cruel, brutalizing,

and outdated form of state-sanctioned vengeance than to seek humane alternatives reflecting progressive standards of justice and decency."

"Georgia can still stop the execution. To do so is not to insult the memory of Aleta Bunch, or to forget the brutal way in which she died. It is to appeal to uphold international standards of decency and humanity."

Amnesty International members worldwide are appealing for clemency.

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*For more information or a copy of "Abandoning Justice: The imminent execution of Alexander Williams, mentally ill child offender" (AI Index: AMR 51/121/00), please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566. The report is available in PDF format on Amnesty International's website: <http://www.amnesty.org>
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