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John Paul II's visit: An opportunity for the USA to reflect on its human rights record

This week's visit to the USA by Pope John Paul II, coupled with his recent statements against the death penalty, should serve as a timely reminder to the USA that it is high time for the country to examine its own human rights record, Amnesty International said today.

John Paul II's Christmas message -- asking for urgent and adequate measures to defend human life and to end the death penalty -- as well as earlier statements supporting a proposal for a moratorium on executions in the year 2000, has raised hopes that His Holiness might raise the issue of human rights in the USA in his meeting with President Bill Clinton.

Amnesty International -- which is currently holding a worldwide campaign challenging the US government to live up to international human rights standards within its own territory -- is particularly concerned at the use of the death penalty against juvenile offenders in the USA.

"Amnesty International would particularly like His Holiness to remind President Clinton and the US federal authorities of their duty to ensure that all government officials abide by the country's international obligations," the organization stressed. "These obligations include the global ban on the use of the death penalty against children."

Several prisoners are due to be executed in the USA within the coming weeks. One of them, Sean Sellers, would be the first US prisoner put to death for a crime committed when under 17. As such, his killing would represent a further disturbing development in the USA's attachment to the death penalty.

"The execution of this young man for a crime committed when he was still a child, would send a brutal message into national and global society from one of the most powerful and influential countries on earth," Amnesty International said.

Another death penalty case currently being highlighted by Amnesty International is that of Randolph Reeves, a native American who was tried before an all-white jury and convicted of capital murder despite mitigating circumstances. The father of one of the murdered victims in this case -- Janet Meaner -- opposes the execution:

I was born and raised in the belief that violence is not an acceptable method of solving the problems that arise in our daily lives... The fact that my daughter, Janet, was a victim of murder has not changed that belief... The use of the death penalty only lowers the standards of government to the mentality of the murderer himself...

Hours before his 14 January date with death, Mr Reeves received a stay of execution from

the Nebraska Supreme Court. Amnesty International fears that this stay will be lifted in the future and Mr Reeves will die at the hands of the state.

“The USA’s use of the death penalty undermines the whole framework of international human rights standards built up since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948,” Amnesty International said. “This -- together with the fact that human rights violations are taking place at the hands of police officers, prison guards, immigration and other officials in the USA -- points to the need for the country to examine its current stand on human rights.”

“Amnesty International hopes John Paul II’s visit will lead to such a reflection and to a clear commitment on the part of the US federal, state and local authorities to increase accountability on human rights issues and achieve concrete reforms to bring an end to these abuses.”

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