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Feeding the culture of violence: 5 more US executions scheduled this week

Last week was National Non-Violence Week in the USA. This week, five men are scheduled to be executed in five states -- bringing the year's total to 86. "These two approaches to confronting violence are irreconcilable," Amnesty International said today, and urged the country to reject the cruelty of the death penalty.

"A week after US society focussed its attention on tackling the culture of violence, US leaders are set to reaffirm their faith in the brutal message that killing is an appropriate response to killing", Amnesty International said. "That message is a part of the problem, not the solution."

Last week's activities included a two-day "Voices Against Violence" conference in Washington DC, bringing together teenagers, members of Congress and others to find answers to youth violence. In stark contrast, two weeks earlier, the US Solicitor General filed a brief in the Supreme Court urging it not to consider whether the USA should stop executing people for crimes committed when they were children, a practice in which the US far and away leads the world.

"How can the USA's insistence on its right to kill child offenders, in the face of international law and a global consensus that such executions are wrong, help to teach young people the value of life, law and respect for human rights?" Amnesty International asked.

As more and more countries turn their backs on the death penalty, the USA's claims to be a progressive force for human rights are becoming less and less credible given its relentless resort to state killing.

"It is time US leaders reflected upon the damage they are doing to their country's image," Amnesty International said.

- **Florida:** Anthony Bryan is facing execution in Florida's electric chair on Wednesday. Last month, three of the state's seven Supreme Court judges delivered an impassioned dissent on Florida's use of the electric chair, variously describing it as "barbaric", "savage", "inhumane" and "more befitting a violent murderer than a civilized state". Their attack followed the recent bloody execution of Allen Lee Davis, the first execution under Governor Jeb Bush's leadership.

Texas: On Thursday, Domingo Cantu is scheduled to become the 105th prisoner to be executed under the governorship of George W. Bush, brother of the Florida governor. The Texas governor is campaigning for the US Presidency on a platform of "compassionate conservatism". Amnesty International continues to question how that slogan squares with his record on the death penalty.

Arizona: Ignacio Ortiz is scheduled for execution on Wednesday. The international fallout from the execution of two German citizens in Arizona earlier in the year is still being felt: Germany has announced that it will sue the USA in the International Court of Justice for violating international agreements.

Virginia and South Carolina: Michael Williams and Richard Johnson are scheduled for execution on Thursday and Friday respectively. The Governors of Virginia and South Carolina will be their last hope for clemency if last-minute court appeals fail. Governor Gilmore has already allowed 12 people to go to their deaths in Virginia's death chamber this year.

“Those on death row have been convicted of appalling crimes, but society should not condone the premeditated killing of defenceless people, whatever they have done”, Amnesty International said. “If it does, it condemns us all to live in a world where brutality is officially sanctioned and where murderers set the moral tone.”

Eighty-one prisoners have been gassed, electrocuted, or lethally injected in the USA so far in 1999 -- more than in any year since 1954. It is likely that at least 100 inmates will have been put to death nationwide before the year is out.

“The majority of elected officials in the USA are too afraid of public support for the death penalty to openly question it”, Amnesty International said. “This failure of leadership renders them complicit in the cycle of violence and is generating increasing international concern about the USA's commitment to human rights.”

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