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The conveyor belt of death continues - 500th execution looms in the USA

A macabre milestone in the history of the USA is about to be reached. At a time when people around the world will be marking 50 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the USA is set to carry out its 500th execution since resuming judicial killing in 1977.

"Behind this statistic lies the brutal reality that US officials will, five hundred times, have taken a human being out of a prison cell, led them to an execution chamber and either hanged, shot, gassed, electrocuted or poisoned them to death," Amnesty International said.

"How many more people will be subjected to this cold-blooded ritual in a country which repeatedly claims to be the world's most progressive force for human rights?"

The affront to the Universal Declaration will come into stark focus on 10 December, Human Rights Day. On that day, exactly 50 years after the international community adopted a vision of a world free from state cruelty, Texas and Oklahoma plan to execute Joseph Faulder, a Canadian national, and Tuan Nguyen, a former child refugee from Vietnam.

"Five decades after playing a leading role in drafting the UDHR, the USA continues to undermine that pioneering text by selling the message that killing is an appropriate response to killing," Amnesty International said. "How can this do anything but entrench the cycle of violence in society?"

A majority of countries -- more than 100 -- have turned away from judicial killing. But as the list of countries using the death penalty has steadily shrunk, the pace of executions in the USA has risen relentlessly. Whereas 11 prisoners were put to death in the first six years after 1977, more than 300 have been executed in the last six, increasingly by lethal injection.

For the past six years, the USA has killed an average of one condemned prisoner a week, in a dehumanizing routine of clinical killing.

The pace of execution is still not fast enough for some politicians and prosecutors, who continue to call for a speedier appeals process.

"It is a disturbing spectacle at the end of the 20th century to see elected officials using the death penalty to compete with each other over who is toughest on crime", Amnesty International commented. "Their energy would surely be better spent educating public opinion rather than pandering to opinion polls. It is time they had the courage and imagination to publicly question a punishment that is failing to achieve constructive solutions to violent crime."

Hundreds of thousands of murders have occurred in the USA since executions resumed. Those who have been "selected" to die for their crimes by a capital justice system prone to race and class bias are overwhelmingly the poor and members of racial and ethnic minorities.

In defiance of international standards, at least 30 mentally retarded prisoners have been

among the 500 put to death Many on death row are mentally ill.

In violation of international law, 12 people have been put to death for crimes committed when they were children.

"The US authorities remain arrogantly dismissive of an international legal and moral consensus that such executions are wrong," Amnesty International said. "We know of three executions of juvenile offenders in the world in 1998 - all were in the USA." Some 70 others remain on US death rows for crimes committed when they were 16 or 17.

The three juvenile offenders executed this year were all borderline mentally retarded, and were emerging from poverty-stricken, violent and abusive childhoods when they committed their crimes. According to Amnesty International, any signs of their rehabilitation or hope of their eventual reintegration into society were ignored to satisfy perceived public demand.

Background

When executions first resumed, US politicians justified the death penalty as a deterrent to violent crime. With the failure of that argument, rather than exploring humane alternatives to judicial killing, they have turned to exploiting the concept of "victims' rights". Responding to the fear and anger generated by violent crime, they lead, rather than challenge, the call for perpetrators to die for their "cold-blooded" crimes. Executions are advocated as a source of release from grief for relatives of murder victims. But an execution - itself a profoundly cold-blooded act - can guarantee no such healing.

Those on death row have been convicted of brutal crimes with tragic ramifications for the victims' families, which Amnesty International would never seek to belittle. However, the organization believes that all human beings -- regardless of who they are or what they have done -- are entitled to basic rights.

More and more relatives of murder victims are also speaking out against this notion that a retaliatory killing brings peace. They believe the opposite is the case - that an execution does nothing to help family members come to terms with their loss, that it represents an appalling memorial to their loved one, creates more victims, and demeans society as a whole. Amnesty International believes it is time for politicians to listen to what they are saying.

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Note: At the time of writing the 499th and 500th executions (Joseph Faulder, Texas, and Tuan Nguyen, Oklahoma) are due to take place on 10 December. This may change if and when stays of execution are given to them or other prisoners.