

AI INDEX: AMR 51/76/97
25 NOVEMBER 1997

USA: Amnesty International's Secretary General, horrified with Pennsylvania's death row, hears testimony of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Scott Blystone

After spending a day hearing testimony from Pennsylvania condemned prisoners Mumia Abu-Jamal and Scott Blystone, Amnesty International's Secretary General expressed sadness and horror at the brutality of the conditions they described.

"Death row in Pennsylvania looks and feels like a morgue," Mr. Sané said minutes after he left the state-of-the-art Supermax prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania, which houses the state's principal death row. "Everything is high-tech, and there is no human being in sight. From the moment that condemned prisoners arrive, the state tries to kill them slowly, mechanically and deliberately -- first spiritually, and then physically."

According to the prisoners' testimony, these efforts include beatings by guards, isolation, continual withdrawal of privileges, unnecessary disciplinary action and harassment of visitors, who are often denied entry.

In addition, both Mr. Abu-Jamal and Mr. Blystone told the Secretary General about the harrowing experience of receiving a death warrant. Mr. Abu-Jamal described the process of being placed on death watch: "There are six cells, cages shielded by plastic. At the front of each cell door is a box containing a remote control camera that monitors your every movement, twenty four hours a day. The guard that used to watch us has been replaced by an impersonal camera. It's all part of the dehumanizing process."

Mr. Blystone told Mr. Sané: "They come to your cell. You know they are bringing a warrant, because they are very polite. They come for you with twelve officers. They handcuff you, belt you, shackle your feet. You can hear your heart beating as they inspect your veins to make sure that they can withstand the size of the needle that will be used to kill you. They measure you for a burial suit. They call your family and tell them where to pick up your dead body."

Defense attorneys in Pennsylvania told Mr. Sané that the governor signs these death warrants prematurely, when the prisoners are still in the process of appealing their convictions in state courts. "This unnecessary procedure is tantamount to psychological torture," said Mr. Sané. "Every time the governor signs a warrant, a mother, a wife, a brother, gets a phone call announcing their loved one's death."

The Secretary General said that he was particularly concerned that prison guards confiscated the notes that Blystone had brought to the meeting, in which he had detailed physical abuse by prison guards and included the names of the alleged perpetrators. "Scott was led to believe that he would be allowed to bring his notes to our meeting," said Mr. Sané. "Now he is terrified that the guards who read these notes will take reprisals against him."

Mr. Sané added that Amnesty International is alerting its members to write to the prison authorities expressing these concerns. In addition, Mr. Sané said that Amnesty International is

in the process of reviewing Mr. Abu-Jamal's original trial in order to determine if it conformed to international standards of justice.

"Amnesty International has serious doubts about the fairness of Mr. Abu-Jamal's trial, which may have been contaminated by the deep-rooted racism that appears to taint the application of the death penalty in Pennsylvania," Mr. Sané said.

Mr. Sané also expressed outrage that poor capital defendants like Mr. Blystone do not receive adequate legal representation when they are on trial for their lives. Mr. Blystone's original court-appointed attorney had been a practising lawyer for three months and had no experience in murder trials when he defended him, and he failed to present crucial mitigating evidence that could have saved his client's life.

"The system has failed Scott Blystone, and it continues to fail other poor people who cannot afford to obtain adequate legal representation," stated Mr. Sané.

These concerns led Mr. Sané to issue a challenge to the governor and the Attorney General of Pennsylvania to initiate a full investigation into the racist and unfair application of the death penalty in the state, and to call for a moratorium on all executions.

"Surely no governor, Attorney General or District Attorney, no matter how supportive of capital punishment, can publicly support a system so racially biased and unfair," Mr. Sané said.

After his visit to State Correctional Institution-Greene, Mr. Sané addressed the Philadelphia Bar Association - the largest Bar Association in Pennsylvania - in support of a resolution calling for a moratorium on all executions. The Attorney General of Pennsylvania, Mike Fisher, and representatives of Philadelphia's District Attorney's office spoke against the motion, and denied that the death penalty was applied unfairly in Pennsylvania.

However, the motion was overwhelmingly approved by the association's Board of Governors. The Bar Association cited its concerns that the death penalty may be imposed on defendants who have been inadequately represented at trial, as well as the racial disparities in the use of the death penalty, when it called for the moratorium.
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