

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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EXTRA 17/95

Death Penalty

22 February 1995

USA (Oklahoma)

Thomas GRASSO

Thomas Grasso is scheduled to be executed in Oklahoma on 20 March 1995.

Thomas Grasso, white, was sentenced to death for the murder in 1990 of 87-year-old Hilda Johnson.

Thomas Grasso was serving a 20-year sentence in New York State for a separate murder. After his conviction in New York, he was returned to Oklahoma to stand trial for the killing of Hilda Johnson. Upon conviction in Oklahoma, Grasso was sentenced to death and refused to lodge any appeals: on 8 October 1993 he was just 11 hours away from death when the execution was stayed after requests from the authorities in New York that he be returned to complete his 20-year sentence. Upon hearing the news that his execution would not go ahead, Grasso stated, "My whole day is totally ruined. This is giving me a major headache."

Upon completion of his 20-year sentence in New York, Grasso would have been returned to Oklahoma to face execution.

The new governor of New York, George E. Pataki, had made an election pledge during the 1994 contest for the state governorship to return Grasso to Oklahoma to face execution. Governor Pataki had used former Governor Mario Cuomo's refusal to allow Grasso to be returned to Oklahoma to highlight Cuomo's opposition to the death penalty. Governor Pataki is now sponsoring plans to reintroduce the death penalty to New York and reports indicate that legislation may be voted on as early as 27 February 1995.

Grasso has consistently expressed his wish to be executed and is currently refusing to lodge any legal or clemency appeals to the appropriate authorities.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally as a violation of the right to life and the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The execution of prisoners who have chosen to abandon their appeals, and allow the state to execute them, is no less a gross human rights violation than any other execution. The fact that an individual makes such a choice does not relieve the state of its responsibility in taking the life of one of its citizens.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As of October 1994, there were 124 prisoners under sentence of death in Oklahoma. Since executions resumed in 1990, three prisoners have been put to death in the state under its present death penalty laws. The most recent person to be executed in Oklahoma was Olan Robison on 13 March 1992. The method of execution is lethal injection.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please telephone or send telegrams/faxes/express and airmail letters in English is possible:

- acknowledging the seriousness of the crime for which Thomas Grasso was sentenced to death and expressing sympathy for the victim's family;
- urging, however, that Governor Keating grant clemency to Thomas Grasso by commuting his death sentence;

- pointing out that detailed research in the USA and other countries has provided no evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments, and that no decline in homicides has been identified in those US states which now execute prisoners on a regular basis.

APPEALS TO:

The Honorable Frank Keating
Governor of Oklahoma
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USA

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Telegrams: Governor Keating, Oklahoma, USA

Salutation: Dear Governor

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and to diplomatic representatives of the USA in your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.