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### **Oklahoma: child offender to be killed next week**

On the day when the Pope repeated his appeal against the death penalty, respect for human rights in the USA hit another low with the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board's vote to execute Sean Sellers for crimes committed when he was a child, Amnesty International said .

The five members of the board yesterday ruled without hesitation that Sellers should not be granted mercy. After the hearing, one of the Board members told the media "I hope this sends a message to all the 16-year-olds of this state".

"The only message this decision sends to 16-year-olds and the rest of US society is that killing is the appropriate response to killing," Amnesty International commented.

"The international community has agreed that executing people for crimes committed when they are under 18 is wrong," the organization continued. "However, the USA considers itself above international law."

Sean Sellers, who would be the first prisoner executed for a crime committed at 16 since the USA resumed judicial killing in 1977, is scheduled to be executed on 4 February. Amnesty International will continue its efforts to stop his execution.

### **Background**

Sean Sellers shot his mother and stepfather in 1986. Among those appealing to the board to deny clemency were members of his own family. His stepsister urged that he be put to death. As Sean Sellers -- wearing handcuffs and leg irons -- wept while telling the board of his remorse, one of his uncles, who had already urged that clemency be denied, shouted across the room "Stop begging. Take the punishment."

Sean Sellers told the Board that he could never make up for his crimes, but that he wanted to continue his work from prison to help disturbed teenagers. "I cannot imagine what I could say today that would cause you to have mercy on me," he reportedly said to the Board. "The only thing I know to do is try to show you my heart."

On the day of the hearing, in neighbouring Missouri, Pope John Paul II challenged US Catholics to reject the cruelty of the death penalty, saying that "A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform". In Oklahoma, the state Governor, a Catholic, welcomed the Board's vote on Sean Sellers. The USA executed three child offenders in 1998, the only such

executions known in the world. The execution of Sean Sellers would mean that the USA has put to death more child offenders since 1990 than the rest of the world combined.

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For further information, see Amnesty International's press release "The USA to confirm its position as world leader in killing child offenders" (AI INDEX: AMR 51/10/99 -- 21 January 1999) and the document "Killing hope: the imminent execution of Sean Sellers" (AI INDEX:AMR 51/108/98). To obtain copies or to arrange an interview, call the Amnesty International press office on +44 171 413 5566 / 5808/5810)