

PUBLIC

AI Index: AMR 51/024/2002

5 February 2002

Further information on UA 268/01 (23 October 2001, AMR 51/155/2001) - Death penalty / Legal concern

USA (Louisiana) Joseph Ward (m), white, aged 18

Joe Ward is no longer facing the possibility of a death sentence. On 28 January, the District Attorney's Office in Alexandria, Rapides Parish, Louisiana, amended the charge against him to one of second degree murder, which does not carry the death penalty.

Early in the case, the prosecution announced its intention to seek the death penalty against Joe Ward, charged with the first-degree murder of 25-year-old school teacher Christina Smith in 2000. Joe Ward was 17 years old at the time of the murder. International law prohibits the use of the death penalty against those who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

Christina Smith's brother, Robert Smith, who was 18 at the time of the shooting, was also charged with first-degree murder in the crime. The prosecution never publicly stated whether they would seek the death penalty against him. According to reports, the prosecution privately admitted to not wishing to seek the death sentence in order to spare the murder victim's parents from being subjected to the trauma of the death of another of their children. The charge against Robert Smith has also now been reduced to second degree murder.

The local Alexandria newspaper, *The Town Talk*, reported in November that the case had become "the focus of an international campaign" and quoted from letters sent by UA activists. The newspaper reported that appeals were arriving "daily" in the office of Assistant District Attorney Mike Shannon, who was quoted as saying that he was receiving "a pile of them every day".

No further action by the UA Network is requested. Joe Ward's lawyer has asked for his thanks to be relayed to all who sent appeals, which are believed to have contributed to the prosecutor's decision.