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USA: Executions would indicate empty rhetoric of State of the Union address

Two executions scheduled for next week provide the US authorities an opportunity to show the world that aspects of President Bush's State of the Union address were more than triumphalist rhetoric, Amnesty International said today, highlighting the cases of Alexander Williams and Thomas Miller-El, due to be put to death in Georgia and Texas on 20 and 21 February respectively.

"President Bush said that the United States 'will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity'", Amnesty International recalled. "Among these non-negotiable issues, the President listed the 'rule of law' and 'equal justice'".

The principle of equal justice was jettisoned at Thomas Miller-El's 1986 trial, with the prosecutors resorting to racist tactics to exclude African Americans from the jury which sentenced this black man to death for killing a white man. As for the rule of law, the execution of Alexander Williams, who was 17 at the time of the crime, would violate a fundamental principle of international law banning the execution of child offenders. The death penalty is always incompatible with human dignity.

The only black allowed on to Miller-El's jury was a man who favoured the slow torturing to death of murderers on the grounds that execution is "too quick". It seems that the two Dallas County prosecutors - each of whom was found to have engaged in racist jury selection in cases tried just before and after Miller-El's - were being

guided by a local manual still in circulation into the 1980s which warned prosecutors not to select jurors from minority races, people with "physical afflictions" and Jews, on the grounds that they "usually empathize with the accused".

"The history of the death penalty in the USA is one of racist use", Amnesty International continued. "The execution of Thomas Miller-El should be opposed by every US official who wants to demonstrate that their country is serious about breaking from this infamous past."

It is just six months since the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on the US Government to do something about racial discrimination in capital cases. Amnesty International wrote this week to Secretary of State Colin Powell about the Thomas Miller-El case to remind him of this expert UN body's exhortation and to call for State Department intervention.

The internationally illegal execution of Alexander Williams must be likewise opposed. Since January 1993, the USA has executed 13 child offenders - those under 18 years old at the time of the crime. This represents 60 per cent of the known worldwide total of such executions in this period. Alexander Williams, who was denied his internationally recognized right to adequate representation at his 1986 trial, has been diagnosed as suffering from serious mental illness, and forcibly medicated with anti-psychotic drugs on death row. In repeated resolutions in recent years, the UN Commission on Human Rights has called on retentionist countries not to use the death penalty against the mentally ill.

"The presidential address praised the international coalition 'rallied' by the USA after September 11," Amnesty International noted. "The executions of Miller-El and Williams would break an emerging

international 'coalition' against the death penalty, and once again show the contempt in which the USA all too often holds international human rights standards".

Among those who have called for these executions to be halted are United Nations Special Rapporteurs, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the European Union and the Council of Europe.

Amnesty International's members worldwide continue to work against these and all executions, and to campaign to persuade the United States and other retentionist countries to join the clear majority of nations which have turned their backs on judicial killing.

"In his State of the Union address, President Bush said that the USA long ago made a choice to respect 'the dignity of every life'", Amnesty International noted. "This is a statement of stunning irony coming from a leader whose five-year governorship of Texas saw a record 152 executions, and who has become the first US President in nearly four decades to oversee the execution of federal death row prisoners."

The report "USA: Crying out for clemency: The case of Alexander Williams, mentally ill child offender facing execution" can be viewed at: <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AMR511392000?OpenDocument&of=COUNTRIES\USA>

The letter to the US Secretary of State, Colin Powel, can be viewed at: <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/amr510332002>

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