

26 February 2002

Further information on EXTRA 14/02 (AMR 51/030/2002, 12 February 2002) and follow-up (AMR 51/036/2002, 20 February 2002) - Death penalty / Legal concern

USA (Georgia) Alexander Edmund Williams (m), black, aged 33

---

On 25 February 2002, the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles commuted the death sentence of Alexander Williams to life imprisonment without parole. The last death row inmate to be granted clemency by the Georgia Board was Eli Beck on 2 May 1994.

Alexander Williams, who suffers from serious mental illness for which he has been forcibly medicated on death row, was facing execution for the 1986 murder of 16-year-old Aleta Carol Bunch committed when Williams himself was only 17. International law forbids the execution of people who were under 18 at the time of the crime.

Alexander Williams had been scheduled to be executed on 20 February. The Board stayed his execution on 19 February in order to have more time to consider his case. On 21 February, the Board sent three psychiatrists into the prison to evaluate Alexander Williams's mental condition. The psychiatrists reported back to the Board on 25 February, after which the Board voted to commute the death sentence, a few hours before the stay of execution was due to run out.

In a statement issued on 25 February, the Chairman of the Board of Pardons and Paroles said: "We have the deepest sympathy for the family of Aleta Bunch and especially her mother Mrs. Carolyn Bunch. The pain and devastation that Williams caused this family can never be erased. By making sure that Williams will remain in an 8' by 10' prison cell for the rest of his life with absolutely no hope for parole, we hope that the certainty of our decision will give Mrs. Bunch the closure she so deserves."

The case generated huge international concern and pressure on the Board to grant clemency. Among those who called for the execution to be halted was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, two UN Special Rapporteurs, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the European Union, and the Council of Europe. Inside the USA, appeals were made by the American Bar Association, Children's Defense Fund and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Board of Pardons and Paroles has commuted Alexander Williams's sentence to one which was not only reportedly unavailable to the jury in 1986, but one which also violates international law. Life imprisonment without the possibility of release against people who were under 18 at the time of the crime violates the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by 191 countries. The USA, the only country apart from Somalia not to have ratified the Convention, has signed it. It has thereby bound itself under international law not to do anything which would undermine the provisions of the treaty pending a decision on whether to ratify it.

For further information on this case, please see *Crying out for clemency: the case of Alexander Williams, mentally ill child offender facing execution* (AMR 51/139/00, September 2000).

No further action by the UA Network is requested. Alexander Williams's lawyer has asked that the defence team's thanks be passed on to all who sent appeals.