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Tennessee set to take step backwards with first execution in 40 years

The State of Tennessee will be taking a step back into the past if it carries out its first execution since November 1960, Amnesty International said today.

44 year-old Robert Glen Coe -- who has a long history of mental illness and suffered a childhood marked by his father's sexual and physical violence -- is scheduled to be executed at 1 a.m. local time on 19 April. He has twice come within hours of execution in the past month. He was sentenced to death for the 1979 abduction, rape and murder of eight-year-old Cary Ann Medlin.

"The crime for which Robert Coe was convicted undoubtedly shocks the human conscience," Amnesty International said. "However, increasing numbers of people, both inside and outside the United States, are coming to the conclusion that the death penalty is also unconscionable, and should have no place in modern day society."

"When Tennessee executed William Tines on 7 November 1960, only a handful of countries had abolished the death penalty," Amnesty International said. "On the eve of Robert Coe's execution four decades later, 108 countries are abolitionist in law or practice. There is little doubt of how history will judge Tennessee's resumption of state killing."

The killing of Cary Ann Medlin galvanized the "victims' rights" movement in Tennessee and fuelled support for the death penalty. Two decades after this appalling murder, however, a growing number of murder victims' relatives around the USA are speaking out against executions.

Marietta Jaeger is one of them. She lost her seven-year-old daughter to a brutal abduction and murder in Montana in 1973, and now campaigns tirelessly against the death penalty: "*Loved ones, wrenched from our lives by violent crime, deserve more beautiful, noble and honourable memorials than pre-meditated, state-sanctioned killings,*" she says. "*The death penalty only creates more victims and more grieving families. By becoming that which we deplore -- people who kill people -- we insult the sacred memory of all our precious victims.*"

Many people in the USA are increasingly concerned about the risk of executing the innocent, given the shocking rate of wrongful convictions in US capital cases. But many, too, are beginning to recognize the unacceptability of their country's use of the death penalty against the seriously mentally impaired, those who had inadequate legal representation, and those who committed their crimes when still children.

"Such cases violate international standards of human rights and decency, and yet are allowed in the USA," Amnesty International said.

Robert Coe is facing execution despite doubts about his sanity, as well as lingering concerns about the circumstances of his conviction. The confession, later retracted, given to police by this mentally disordered individual, together with questions surrounding the reliability of witness testimony and the existence of another suspect, should ring

alarm bells in a country where the use of the death penalty has repeatedly been shown to be arbitrary and prone to error.

“No capital justice system can ever guarantee freedom from fatal error,” Amnesty International said. “But that is only one reason to abolish this outdated punishment. Its cruelty is inescapable. And time and time again we see it disproportionately targeted at the poor, the abused, the mentally impaired and emotionally disturbed, and members of minority groups.”

If Tennessee takes this backward step, it will become the 31st US state to carry out an execution since the United States resumed judicial killing in 1977. Since then, 626 prisoners have been killed, the vast majority in the 1990s. Twenty-eight prisoners have been executed this year.

Amnesty International members around the world continue to appeal to Governor Don Sundquist of Tennessee to stop the execution of Robert Coe.

Background

Marietta Jaeger is a Board Member and Co-Founder of *Journey of Hope... From Violence to Healing*. See their website at www.journeyofhope.org. See, also, the website of *Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation*, www.mvfr.org.

For more information on the USA’s current use of the death penalty, see Amnesty International’s new 78-page report, *USA: Failing the Future, Death Penalty Developments March 1998 - March 2000*, available from the organization’s International Secretariat.

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