

USA (ALABAMA) Pernell FORD, aged 34

Pernell Ford is scheduled to die in Alabama's electric chair on 9 July 1999. He was sentenced to death in 1984 for the 1983 murder of Linda Gail Griffith, 42, and her mother Willie Griffith, 74, when he was 18 years old. Ford, who has suffered from serious mental health problems and suicidal tendencies since he was a child, has given up his appeals.

From the age of six, Pernell Ford spent extended periods in mental health institutions, and by 13 was being prescribed powerful anti-psychotic and anti-depressant drugs. During his adolescence he attempted suicide several times, including by overdose, hanging and poisoning. He last attempted to kill himself in March 1998. Following a psychotic episode, he was removed to a "strip" (isolation) cell, where he reportedly found a knife, with which he gave himself a deep neck wound, and cut his wrists.

Pernell Ford, who is black, was tried in 1984 by an all-white jury (the Griffiths were white). Shortly before the trial, he dismissed his lawyers. He was found competent to act as his own lawyer despite his youth, his limited formal education, an IQ measured at 80, and his history of mental problems. The only "defence" he offered was that God would intervene at the trial and bring the victims back to life. For most of the proceedings, Pernell Ford remained silent and withdrawn. There was no opening statement on his behalf, no objections, and no cross-examination of any witnesses.

At his sentencing, Pernell Ford dressed himself in a white bed sheet, worn toga-style with a belt and shoulder strap made from a white towel. In a long speech, he asked the judge to have the coffins of the Griffiths brought into the courtroom so that God could raise them from the dead in front of the jurors. After sentencing him to death, the judge told Ford that by law he would receive an automatic appeal. Pernell Ford responded that he did not want one. As he was led from the court he reportedly waved to the prosecutor and said "see you at the electric chair."

He has periodically given up his appeals, but has resumed them when his mental health has stabilized. Since being on death row, he has been diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia and depression and treated with a range of drugs.

At a recent federal hearing on his decision to waive his appeals, Pernell Ford told the court that since 1994 he has been able to transport himself anywhere on earth, by a method he calls "translation". He stated that one of his first "translations" from his cell was to India, where he now has a number of wives. He claimed that he has many wives in other countries, including the Philippines, Colombia, Ecuador and Spain. He said that he has millions of dollars in a Swiss bank account, which will support his wives and children after his execution. He said that when he dies he will become the Holy Spirit and sit on the left hand of God, and that he has already visited heaven in an earlier "translation". He stated his belief that he alone has been given such supernatural powers.

Pernell Ford acknowledged that others believe he is mentally ill, but stated that they have misinterpreted what was in fact spiritual conflict. He said that he has never been mentally ill: "I had a lot of problems when I was little, but nothing that can classify me as insane".

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A growing number of condemned US prisoners are giving up their appeals and consenting to their execution. The decision to waive appeals may be related to any number of factors, including mental illness, the severity of living under a death sentence, or an overwhelming sense of remorse. Whatever the reason, none can excuse the state's involvement in a premeditated human rights violation. Under any circumstances, an execution is an affront to human dignity and serves only to deepen a culture of violence.

Alabama has put 18 prisoners to death since it resumed executions in 1983. Most recently, Brian Baldwin was executed on 18 June 1999, despite widespread concern that he was the victim of racism and police misconduct (EXTRA 71/99, AMR 51/96/99, 15 June, and update, AMR 51/99/99). In 1995 Varnall Weeks was executed in Alabama despite his long history of mental illness, including schizophrenia. He believed that his execution would transform him into a tortoise, after which he would rule over the universe. A judge ruled that the execution could proceed, despite Weeks being "what the average person on the street would regard to be insane", because his ability to answer a few limited questions about his execution proved that he was legally "competent". A psychiatrist recently found Wernell Ford to be competent to waive his appeals because he could make decisions about everyday transactions such as ordering sweets from the prison store.

Since the USA resumed executions in 1977, 553 people have been executed nationwide, most recently Robert Walls in Missouri on 30 June 1999.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please telephone or send telegrams/faxes/express/ airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing deep concern that the State of Alabama is intending to execute Pernell Ford, despite powerful evidence of his long-term mental illness, including schizophrenia;
- noting that the US National Alliance for the Mentally Ill believes that the death penalty is "never appropriate for a defendant suffering from schizophrenia or other serious brain disorders";
- noting that in May 1999 Governor Gilmore of Virginia commuted, on humanitarian grounds, the death sentence of Calvin Swann, who had suffered from schizophrenia from the age of 19;
- urging the Governor to stop this execution and to commute Pernell Ford's sentence to a humane alternative;
- expressing sympathy for the victims of violent crime and their families.

APPEALS TO:

The Honourable Don Siegelman
 Governor of Alabama
 Alabama State Capitol
 600 Dexter Avenue
 Room N-104, Montgomery, Alabama 36130, USA
Faxes: + 1 334 242 0937 or 242 2335
Telegrams: Governor Siegelman, Montgomery, Alabama, USA
Telephone: + 1 334 242 7100
Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the USA accredited to your country.

UA Participants who wish to send an immediate and expedited brief message of support to Pernell Ford, may do so (noting the short time available).

Pernell Ford, Z-445, Holman 3700, Atmore, Alabama 36503, USA

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.