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USA: Pratt case – after 27 years it is time for justice to be done

Tomorrow's crucial hearing in the case of Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) -- a former Black Panther Party leader released on bail last year after serving 27 years for murder -- must grant him a new, fair trial or drop the charges against him, Amnesty international said today.

"Geronimo ji Jaga has already spent 27 years in jail for a crime he claims he did not commit. The new evidence which has emerged since his trial would have made it impossible for a jury to convict him of murder in the first place," the organization added.

The new evidence clearly supports ji Jaga's allegation that he was framed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as part of COINTELPRO, a program to destabilize black political organizations in the 1970s.

It also reinforces Amnesty International's concern over many years that the misconduct of law enforcement agencies in the investigation and prosecution of ji Jaga has jeopardized his right to a fair trial.

Background

On 1 July 1998 Amnesty International filed an *amicus curiae* brief to the California Court of Appeal, asking it to affirm a lower court ruling that Geronimo ji Jaga should have a new trial in view of new evidence about a key prosecution witness. The Los Angeles District Attorney had appealed against that ruling.

The *amicus* brief also pointed out the state's failure to disclose the fact that, at the time of the trial, the chief prosecution witness -- who testified that ji Jaga had confessed to the murder -- was an informer for law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, the LAPD and the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office. When on the witness stand, he denied this.

The failure to reveal this information made it impossible for the defence to discredit this witness' testimony. The only other evidence linking ji Jaga to the murder was inherently unreliable identification evidence.

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