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USA: Marking "Human Rights Week" with two executions

The week President Bush has decided to dedicate to human rights will be marked by two more executions in Georgia and Texas, Amnesty International warned today.

Byron Parker is scheduled to be put to death in Georgia this evening, and Vincent Cooks is set to be killed in the Texas lethal injection chamber 24 hours later. If their executions go ahead, they will become the 65th and 66th prisoners to be put to death in the USA this year. More than 600 men and women have been put to death in the USA since 1990.

"Human Rights Week' would be a good time for President Bush to reconsider his support for the death penalty," Amnesty International said. "At the very least, he should recognize that the USA's persistent resort to this outdated punishment is severely undermining its claims to be a progressive force for human rights."

On Sunday 9 December, President Bush proclaimed the week beginning that day as Human Rights Week, 10 December as Human Rights Day, and 15 December as Bill of Rights Day. The proclamation recalled the appalling attacks of 11 September on New York and Washington, and stated: "When our essential rights are attacked, they must and will be defended."

"We deeply regret that the USA continues to defend its 'right' to impose the ultimate punishment in the face of worldwide abolitionist trends, and frequently in violation of international standards," Amnesty International continued. The USA continues to use the death penalty against the mentally impaired, child offenders, the inadequately represented, those whose guilt remains in doubt, and foreign nationals denied their consular rights.

"How much longer before the USA abandons its attachment to the culture of death and cruelty that underlies capital punishment?" Amnesty International asked, noting that more than 100 countries have abandoned judicial killing in law or practice. In contrast, over 3,700 prisoners await execution in the United States.

"We urge President Bush to use 'Human Rights Week' to announce a moratorium on federal executions and his intent to work against the death penalty across the United States," the organization added.

Background

There were a record 152 executions in Texas during George W. Bush's five-year governorship. The first six months of his presidency saw the first federal executions in the USA in 38 years. One of them was carried out despite a call by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights for commutation of the death sentence on the grounds that the defendant, Juan Raul Garza, was denied a fair trial.

International Human Rights Day -- 10 December -- this year marked the 53rd anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration envisioned a world in which the rights to life and freedom from cruelty were fully respected

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