

AI Index: PRE 01/338/2010  
08 October 2010

## **USA increasingly isolated as the world turns against death penalty**

Ahead of World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October, Amnesty International today urged the USA, the only country that carried out executions in the Americas in 2009, to end its use of this cruel and inhumane punishment.

“A clear majority of countries have rejected the death penalty. How can the USA claim leadership on human rights yet still commit judicial killings?” said Widney Brown, Senior Director of International Law and Policy at Amnesty International.

“The death penalty is cruel, degrading, ineffective and entirely incompatible with any concept of human dignity. Its use in the USA is marked by arbitrariness, discrimination and error.”

More than 1,200 men and women have been put to death in the USA since executions resumed in 1977 after a decade without them. Three jurisdictions – Texas, Virginia, and Oklahoma – account for more than half of the country’s executions, geographic bias on a grand scale.

More than 130 prisoners have been released from death rows around the USA since 1976 after being found innocent – nine were freed in 2009 alone. Others have been put to death despite serious doubts over their guilt.

Studies have shown that race plays a part in who receives the death penalty in the USA, with murders involving white victims more likely to result in death sentences than those involving black victims.

“Race, geography, electoral politics, local finances, jury composition, and the quality of legal representation are all problematic factors in capital cases in the USA. Being tried for a capital crime is like taking part in a lethal lottery, and it should have no place in any justice system,” said Widney Brown.

There is no proof that the death penalty deters violent crime more effectively than imprisonment.

“It is indefensible to continue executing people, particularly knowing that innocent people have been sentenced to death. The USA needs to join the abolitionist majority in the world,” said Widney Brown.

Although more than 1,000 executions have been carried out in the USA since 1993 alone, there are signs that public and political support for this punishment is waning.

New Mexico and New Jersey have abolished the death penalty in the past two years, and the annual number of death sentences has dropped by two thirds from its peak in the 1990s. In the past decade, the US Supreme Court has abolished the death penalty for offenders who were under 18 at the time of the crime or who have “mental retardation”.

“The abolition of the death penalty in the USA will be a very important moment in the movement towards

eradication of this punishment globally – and it cannot come soon enough.”

Notes to editors

The 2010 World Day Against the Death Penalty will focus on the use of the death penalty in the USA. Each year 10 October marks the start of a series of campaign events which culminates on 30 November with the illumination of symbolic buildings in more than 1,000 cities around the world, to commemorate the first time that the death penalty was abolished – in 1786 in Tuscany.

The death penalty in the USA can be applied at state and federal level. Today, 15 out of the 50 US states and the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.) are abolitionist in law.