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## **USA: Crucial information 27 years too late for Black Panther leader**

The Californian State's failure to disclose crucial information about a key prosecution witness in the trial of Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) -- a former leader of the Black Panther Party released last year on bail after serving 27 years for murder -- should result in the reversal of his conviction and finally put an end to 27 years of injustice, Amnesty International declared today.

Geronimo ji Jaga was released on bail on 10 June 1997, however, the Los Angeles (LA) District Attorney has appealed against the court's decision to overturn his original conviction. Amnesty International will be filing an *amicus curiae* brief on 1 July -- challenging the district attorney's appeal against a lower court ruling which ordered that Geronimo should have a new trial in view of the evidence about irregular conduct by the prosecuting authorities.

"For years we have maintained that the misconduct of law enforcement agencies in the investigation and prosecution of Geronimo may have jeopardized his right to a fair trial," Amnesty International said. "And now evidence has emerged which would have made it impossible for a jury to convict him of murder in the first place."

"Geronimo ji Jaga has already spent 27 years in jail. It is time that this man receives a fair new trial or have the charges against him dropped altogether."

In its *amicus* briefing to the California Court of Appeal, Amnesty International will be raising the state's failure to disclose the fact that at the time of Geronimo's trial, his chief accuser, Julio Butler, was an informer for law enforcement agencies including the LA Police Department, LA District Attorney's Office and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI. This failure to disclose this information ensured the defence's inability to discredit the testimony of Butler. In addition, the other evidence linking Geronimo to the murder was identification evidence from two witnesses that was inherently unreliable.

"The state's failure to disclose Julio Butler's role as informer led to the state presenting false testimony before the jury which undermines confidence in the verdict" Amnesty International said.

"Geronimo should have been provided with a reasonable opportunity to present his case in conditions that did not place him at a disadvantage," the organization said. "This new evidence clearly supports his allegation that he was framed by the FBI and the LA Police Department as part of a program to destabilize black political organizations."

Amnesty International will be requesting the California Court of Appeal to affirm the lower court's ruling to grant Geronimo a new trial.

### **Background**

Geronimo ji Jaga was convicted in a Los Angeles state court in 1972 of shooting and killing a woman and wounding her husband during a robbery in Santa Monica in 1968. He has always denied involvement in the crime and maintained that he was 400 miles away at a Black Panther Party, BPP meeting in Oakland at the time of the murder. In 1975, US Senate hearings revealed that the BPP was a primary target of COINTELPRO, an FBI counter-intelligence program aimed at disrupting and neutralizing certain US political groups. Information obtained by Geronimo's lawyers from FBI files after 1979 revealed that he was personally targeted for "neutralization" under COINTELPRO at the time of his arrest.

Information from FBI files also indicated that Julius Butler, the chief prosecution witness who testified that Geronimo had confessed to the murder, was a FBI informant for more than two years before the trial. Butler had denied ever being a police informant when on the witness stand. It was also alleged that information about a possible second suspect had been withheld and that the FBI had suppressed its own surveillance evidence which might have exonerated Geronimo.

Geronimo ji Jaga had lodged a number of unsuccessful appeals against his conviction over the years. In 1996 the defence was finally granted an evidentiary hearing based on new evidence which, crucially, included information showing that Julius Butler was listed as a confidential informant in the state prosecutor's files at the time of Geronimo's trial.

Amnesty International first called for a full federal inquiry into Geronimo's case in a report published in October 1981. The organization also called on the Governor of California to conduct an inquiry into the case in 1988. In March 1997, Amnesty International sent an observer to the court hearing for a new trial which took place in Orange County.  
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