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USA: Death penalty state to host international business conference

Modern technology in Texas is being put to a macabre and unacceptable use, Amnesty International said today on the eve of the EUROTEx conference in Dallas on 15 and 16 April 1999.

“Texas will be promoting itself as an international centre of high-tech enterprise. But to many people around the world, Texas is better known as a high-tech execution centre,” the organization added.

The two-day conference will host some 200 information technology companies from Europe, with the aim of building relationships with their Texas counterparts. The event is being promoted as an opportunity to “showcase the State of Texas as a global high tech center.”

Amnesty International members have been campaigning for the past few weeks to remind conference participants of Texas’ grim position at the forefront of high technology appliance to executions.

“Since 1982, 172 inmates have been taken from their cells in Ellis Unit 1 in Huntsville, and put to death by the so-called ‘high-tech’ method of lethal injection,” Amnesty International said today.

“While the world moves towards finally banning the death penalty, Texas is leading the USA’s relentless resort to this punishment.” Nine prisoners have already been executed in Texas in 1999 and over 450 men and women on the state’s death row await the same fate.

By drawing attention to the Texan conveyor belt of death, Amnesty International is not advocating a boycott or disinvestment, or criticizing the European companies involved in the EUROTEX conference.

“We simply believe that companies should be aware of the human rights situation in countries they do business with, and use their influence wherever they can for the good of human rights,” the organization said.

Amnesty International members have also been urging Hugo Paemen, the European Union’s Ambassador to the USA, to raise the issue at the conference. He is scheduled to speak at EUROTEX on 15 April. The European Union is increasingly campaigning against the death penalty worldwide.

“Not only does Texas execute more prisoners than any other US state -- more indeed than most countries -- it also does so with a sometimes appalling disregard for international minimum standards governing the death penalty,” Amnesty International said.

“Since 1990, Texas has executed five juvenile offenders, more than any other jurisdiction in the world,” the organization added, pointing out that this is in flagrant violation of international law banning the use of the death penalty against people under 18 at the time of the crime.

“For some in the state legislature this is still not enough -- there is a proposal to further lower the minimum age for the death penalty in Texas from 17 to 16.”

The catalogue of death penalty concerns in Texas also includes the sentencing and execution of mentally ill and retarded prisoners and numerous capital cases where the defendant received woefully inadequate defence.

“Race and economic status, as elsewhere in the USA, appear to be key factors in who receives a death sentence in Texas,” Amnesty International said.

Texas’ influence on the death penalty goes beyond US borders, with execution “know-how” reported to have been “exported” to at least one other country. On 5 February 1999, the Philippines carried out its first execution in over 20 years -- by lethal injection. Two years earlier, a Philippines government official had reportedly visited the Huntsville lethal injection chamber. He is believed to have witnessed an execution during his visit.

“On the one hand Texas wants to present an image of itself as a modern state,” Amnesty International said, “yet on the other, it pursues a practice which more and more countries are consigning to the history books. It cannot continue with this contradiction and expect its international relations to remain unaffected.”

Background

According to the conference website, EUROTEx has been organized by the Texas Department of Economic Development and the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry (*Eurochambres*). Officially announced by the European Commission on 13 May 1997, the conference will be conducted under the auspices of the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, created in 1995 to facilitate closer economic relations between the European Union and the United States.

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For more information on the death penalty in Texas, see Amnesty International’s report “The death penalty in Texas: Lethal Injustice” (AI Index: AMR 51/10/98, March 1998). To obtain a copy, or to arrange an interview, please contact the Amnesty International Press Office on +44 171 413 5566/5808.