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### **Midnight shame -- USA executes child offender**

The execution of Sean Sellers shames the USA and is a further sign of its selective contempt for the international human rights standards it so often claims to support, Amnesty International said today.

Sean Sellers was executed by lethal injection in Oklahoma State Penitentiary just after midnight on 4 February, for crimes committed when he was a 16-year-old boy.

International law prohibits the use of the death penalty against those under 18 at the time of the crimes. It is a principle that is now so widely accepted that no country is exempt from it.

"The USA's repeated claims that it is the most progressive force for human rights in the world are contradicted by its blatant flouting of the global moral and legal consensus that killing people for their childhood crimes is wrong," Amnesty International said.

"By executing Sean Sellers, the US authorities have turned their clock back 40 years to the last time a US prisoner was put to death for a crime committed at 16. This cannot be defined as a progressive act."

The Organization of American States, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Defence for Children International, the American Bar Association, and Amnesty International were among those who appealed for the execution to be stopped.

On 27 January, the day the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board rejected Sean Sellers plea for clemency, Pope John Paul II challenged the USA to reject the cruelty of the death penalty. However, Oklahoma's Governor, a Catholic, welcomed the clemency rejection. In television interviews on 3 February he said that the Pope was "wrong" about the death penalty.

"In the end, international law and the global moral consensus was ignored to satisfy perceived domestic opinion," Amnesty International continued.

"In doing so the authorities have done nothing but deepen the culture of violence in US society. It is time to seek constructive solutions to violent crimes, including those committed by children."

The execution of Sean Sellers has confirmed the USA as the world's leading perpetrator of the execution of people under 18 at the time of the crime. It has now executed 10 child

offenders since 1990, one more than the rest of the world combined. The nine others killed in the USA were 17 at the time of the crime.

The USA has now carried out the last four executions of child offenders known in the world, having put three such prisoners to death in 1998. Only five other countries are known to have carried out such executions since 1990.

Sean Sellers was the 512th prisoner executed in the USA since it resumed executions in 1977. In the past six years an average of one prisoner a week has been put to death. So far in 1999 the pace has increased to nearly three executions a week. Twelve people have already been killed this year, and at least another 11 are currently facing execution in February.

### **Background**

Against the worldwide trend towards abolition of the death penalty, the USA is not only increasing its own resort to judicial executions but has also contributed to recent retrograde steps on capital punishment in other countries.

The Philippines is due to execute its first prisoner in more than two decades tomorrow, 5 February. In 1997 officials from the Philippines were reported to have visited US execution chambers as part of their research into adopting lethal injection as an execution method.

Similarly, in Guatemala, the lethal injection chamber was imported after a government delegation visited the USA in 1997 to learn about executions by lethal injection. As of February 1999, there are some 35 people awaiting execution on Guatemala's death row.

On 29 January 1999, the Attorneys General of 12 countries of the English-speaking Caribbean signed a statement in Trinidad advising their governments to withdraw from the Inter-American Human Rights Convention and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, then to re-affirm all parts except those dealing with the death penalty.

This decision follows a meeting in early 1998 between the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago and the US Attorney General. Among the topics discussed was the problem Trinidad was having in executing prisoners as quickly as it would like. The US Attorney General reportedly pledged her country's support in giving any assistance Trinidad required in implementing the death penalty.

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