

**THE DEATH PENALTY IN THE OLYMPIC STATE
RACIST, ARBITRARY AND UNFAIR**

**Press conference statement by
Pierre Sané, Secretary General, Amnesty International
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(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Today, as the world's eyes are focused on Atlanta and on the spirit of fairness and equality embodied by the Olympic ideal, we are here to focus on the victims of Georgia's inequality and unfairness.

As we sit in the historic Paschal Centre, on Martin Luther King Drive, we are here in tribute to the unwavering commitment to civil and human rights demonstrated by Dr. King. We are here to talk about how the 1996 Olympic games are taking place in a state which has manifestly failed to uphold his dream.

Less than 40 miles from the Olympic stadium, more than 100 men languish on death row. Many of them are the victims of Georgia's racist, arbitrary and unfair use of the death penalty.

It's racist -- because if you're black, you're far more likely to receive a death sentence than if you're white.

It's arbitrary -- because if it's election year for your district attorney it's electrocution year to get the votes in.

And it's unfair -- because if you're poor, the state may assign you an attorney who does not care whether you win or lose your case or even live or die.

In their bid for the Olympics, the Atlanta Olympic Committee said that the city is the birthplace of the modern human rights movement, even that it is the worldwide capital of human rights.

The reality is rather different.

The reality is that Georgia has a long way to go to shake off its dark past as the one of the citadels of resistance to human and civil rights.

Georgia's long history of racial violence towards its ethnic minorities is still here today in the guise of the modern death penalty.

For some of those men on death row, the very civil rights that Atlanta lays claim to don't mean a thing.

They're being executed because they're black and they've killed a white person.

Because in Georgia, the authorities clearly put a higher value on a white life than a black life -- No white person has ever been put to death for the murder of a black in Georgia person.

They are being executed because they were represented in court by an attorney who failed to investigate their case properly or make representations to the jury to spare their lives, as was the case of John Young.

If you're black and in a Georgia court, your defence attorney can be vehemently opposed to integration, can think that blacks have inferior morals and calls you a nigger. This was the case of Wilburn Dobbs in 1973 but who remains on death row to this day.

A defence attorney may even have made speeches saying that "blacks were responsible for most of the rapes and murders and were getting away with it in the courts". That was the case of Eddie Lee Ross, whose attorney was also Grand Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan for 50 years.

Outrageous? Impossible? Amnesty International has documented such instances in Georgia.

And you can still be sentenced to death after a "fair trial"?

Amnesty International is not just critical of Georgia's record on the death sentence. We are calling on all the states of the USA to abolish the death penalty. We are here because Georgia in particular claims to be a standard-bearer for human rights.

Since the resumption of executions in the USA in 1977, Georgia has put 20 men in the electric chair -- the fifth highest state figure in the US.

Georgia will have some supporters for this policy at the Olympics. As the state proudly sentences people to the electric chair, it stands alongside other bastions of justice and equality such as China, Iran and Nigeria that execute their citizens.

But Georgia will be in a minority at the games. The majority of countries in the world no longer use the death penalty.

They realise that there is no place for the death penalty within a society at peace with itself.

Countries like South Africa, which declared the death penalty unconstitutional because it is a violation to the right to life.

Countries like Brazil, Sri Lanka and Senegal, which have high crime rates but which accept the incontrovertible evidence that has showed time and time again that the death penalty is no more effective as a deterrent than other forms of punishment.

Amnesty International brings to the mayor of Atlanta letters from the Mayors of 10 former Olympic cities. They believe that the death penalty is not commensurate with the Olympic ideal.

We also bring a petition signed by nearly half a million people in 15 countries. People who believe that executions have no place in a modern society which respects the human rights of its people.

Amnesty International has great sympathy for the victims of violent crime and their families. Of course a society has a right to protect itself from those who seek to do its members harm.

But the prisoners who are executed are no longer in the general population and are not a threat to members of the public – Georgia has a life without parole sentence.

So ultimately, the death penalty is merely the state killing to satisfy a thirst for revenge.

The Georgia authorities continually cite the will of the people to justify the death penalty.

The same justification was used when arguing to continue slavery and lynching in the state.

As Georgia celebrates the Olympic spirit, it is prepared to put a prisoner, who is no longer a danger to society, into an electric chair and send more than 2,000 volts through his body.

It is prepared to do this to someone who committed the offence when he was 17-years-old.

It is prepared to do this to someone who is mentally ill.

And it is prepared to do this to people who have not received a fair trial because of the colour of their skin.

In Georgia, African Americans do not stand equal before the law.

In practice, African Americans are routinely denied the opportunity to take part in juries. Of the 12 black men executed in Georgia since 1983, half were tried by all-white juries - yet 27% of Georgia's population is black.

The families of white victims are often consulted by the district attorney on whether a death sentence should be sought; on many occasions black families are not even informed of when the trial of those accused of murdering their loved-ones is taking place.

To compound this injustice, the Federal government appears prepared to sit by and watch its ethnic citizens be treated unequally by the law. Even when their own studies have found that the death penalty is used in a racist manner, the Bush and Clinton administrations have refused to act.

In the 1960s, the Federal government intervened to ensure that black men and women were not denied the right to vote or attend state universities. But they are not prepared to intervene now to ensure that African Americans stand equal before the law when threatened with death.

As we celebrate the final Olympiad of the century, we look forward a new millennium in which the human rights of every citizen, no matter what their race or beliefs, are treated equally before the law.

A new millennium in which the United States of America does not put its citizens to death.

In the words of Martin Luther King:

“Let us stand with a greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be. We have an opportunity to make a better nation.”

ENDS.../