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Press release

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US: More double standards as another child offender set to be executed

(Washington, DC) - In the same week that Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke of "the steadfast commitment of the United States to advance internationally agreed human rights principles worldwide," the US is set to violate a fundamental principle of international law respected across the world, Amnesty International said today, as Oklahoma prepared to execute Scott Hain for a crime committed when he was 17.

"Where will that steadfast commitment be at 6pm on Thursday evening (April 3 2003) in Oklahoma's death chamber?" asked Amnesty International. "As the execution team kills Scott Hain, the United States' claim to be global human rights champion will once again be drained of credibility."

International law prohibits the use of the death penalty against anyone who was under 18 years old at the time of the crime. The US is today virtually the only country prepared to flout this principle.

"Scott Hain is set to become the fourth child offender to be executed in the world in the past 12 months," Amnesty International said. "All four will have been put to death in the United States."

Scott Hain would also become the 18th child offender reported to have been executed worldwide in the past six years. All but five will have been killed in the US, whose President has repeatedly stressed its commitment to the rule of law.

On Monday, launching the US State Department's reports on human rights in other countries, Secretary Powell referred to President Bush's "solemn pledge that the United States will always stand for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity."

"Warehousing a child offender for 15 years, before strapping him down and injecting him with poison - how does that uphold human dignity?" Amnesty International asked, noting that last October four US Supreme Court Justices described the execution of prisoners for crimes committed when they were under 18 years old as "a relic of the past" and a "shameful practice."

Also in October, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights found that by continuing this practice, the US was violating a norm of international law from which no country can exempt itself. It noted that "the acceptance of this norm crosses political and ideological boundaries," and added that violations had been roundly condemned by the international community. Numerous resolutions and statements at the United Nations have called for an end to the execution of child offenders.

Background

The US has put 21 child offenders to death since executions resumed there in 1977, and another 80 prisoners await execution for crimes committed when they were 16 or 17. Oklahoma executed Sean Sellers in 1999 for a crime committed when he was 16. Scott Hain is currently the only other child offender on Oklahoma's death row, where prisoners are housed in conditions that violate international standards. Effectively housed underground, they are confined to their concrete cells for up to 24 hours without access to natural light or fresh air.

Scott Hain and Robert Lambert were sentenced to death for the 1987 murders of Michael Houghton and Laura Sanders. Although the state is still seeking Robert Lambert's execution, he may yet be protected from execution by last year's Supreme Court ruling that the execution of people with mental retardation is unconstitutional. The ruling came 13 years after the United Nations urged all countries to take that step.

On Monday, the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board voted 5-0 to reject clemency for Scott Hain. Amnesty International continues to appeal to Governor Brad Henry to stop the execution, which is scheduled for 6pm on April 3rd in Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester.