

EXTRA 35/02

Death penalty

1 May 2002

USA (Alabama) Lynda Lyon Block (f), white, aged 54

Lynda Block is scheduled to be executed in Alabama's electric chair on 10 May 2002. She was sentenced to death in 1994 for a murder committed in 1993.

Lynda Block and her common-law husband George Sibley were sentenced to death for the murder of police officer Roger Lamar Motley. He was shot in a shopping mall car park in Opelika, eastern Alabama, on 4 October 1993.

Lynda Block, who has claimed that the shooting was self-defence, has waived her right to legal counsel and her right to appeal. This decision stems from her political beliefs, under which she refuses to accept the jurisdiction of the Alabama courts.

George Sibley remains on death row.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally, no matter how heinous the crime, and regardless of the method the state chooses to kill the prisoner. Every death sentence is an affront to human dignity, every execution a symptom of a culture of violence rather than a solution to it.

A clear majority of countries - currently 111 - have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Moreover, the international community has ruled out the death penalty as a sentencing option in international courts for even the worst crimes - genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. In contrast to this, and to the repeated claims by US officials that their country is a progressive force for human rights, the United States continues to resort to this cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. Since resuming executions in 1977, the USA has executed 772 prisoners, more than 600 of whom have been put to death since 1990. Twenty-three prisoners have been put to death so far this year.

The most recent execution in Alabama was that of Pernell Ford in June 2000. He became the 23rd person to be killed in the state's electric chair since 1977. On 25 April 2002, Alabama's Governor signed a bill into law making lethal injection the primary method of execution in the state. From 1 July 2002, condemned inmates will be put to death by lethal injection unless they choose electrocution. The move was made to protect Alabama's death penalty from legal attack on the basis of the constitutionality of the electric chair. Supporters of the death penalty promote lethal injection as a "humane" method of killing condemned prisoners. Such assertions ignore not only repeated instances of "botched" lethal injections, but also the suffering to which the inmate and his or her family are subjected in the wait for execution, regardless of the method used.

As well as its inherent cruelty and potential for killing the wrongfully convicted, the death penalty tends to be applied in a discriminatory and arbitrary manner as the system attempts to select which of the thousands of murders each year in the USA "deserve" an execution in response. The phenomenon of prisoners "consenting" to their own execution - either by

demanding a death sentence at trial or waiving their right to appeal - adds to this arbitrariness. More than 90 prisoners have gone to their deaths in the USA since 1977 who gave up their appeals. Given the rate of error discovered by the appeal courts, there is a significant probability that a number of them would have had their death sentences overturned to prison terms if they had pursued their appeals.

Since 1977, eight women have been executed in the USA. The last woman to be executed in Alabama was Rhonda Bell Martin, who was electrocuted on 11 October 1957 for murder.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language, in your own words:

- expressing sympathy for the family and friends of Roger Lamar Motley;
- expressing absolute opposition to the death penalty;
- calling on the Governor to commute the death sentence of Lynda Block and to support a moratorium in Alabama.

APPEALS TO:

Governor Don Siegelman
State Capitol
600 Dexter Avenue
Room N-104
Montgomery, AL 36130, USA

Fax: + 1 334 242 0937

Email: via website: www.governor.state.al.us/office/email/email.html

Salutation: Dear Governor

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of the USA accredited to your country.

You may also write a brief letter (not more than 250 words) to:

Letters to the Editor
The Birmingham News
PO Box 2553
Birmingham, AL 35202, USA

Fax: + 1 205 325 3345

Email: epage@bhamnews.com

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.