Three executed in Florida, one in Virginia

A week of state-sanctioned slaughter

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31 March 1998

Florida authorities put to death three prisoners last week and are scheduled to execute a fourth, Daniel Remeta, on Tuesday morning. Another prisoner was put to death in Virginia, in the biggest week of state killing this year.

On Monday morning Judy Buenoano, a 54-year-old grandmother convicted of killing her husband in 1971 and her son in 1980, was put to death at the Florida State Prison in Starke. The small woman was reportedly so weak that two guards were needed to hold up her arms and bring her into the death chamber where she was strapped into the 75-year-old electric chair. Smoke rose from her right leg when the executioner sent 2000 volts through her body.

Buenoano was only the third woman to be executed in the US since the US Supreme Court lifted the ban on the death penalty in 1976. In 1984 Velma Barfield was executed in North Carolina. Last month Karla Faye Tucker was put to death in Texas despite worldwide protests.

On Sunday the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta and the US Supreme Court denied appeals from Buenoano's lawyers who maintained her innocence and argued that Florida's electric chair was "barbaric" and "belongs in Frankenstein's laboratory."

Buenoano was the first woman executed by the state of Florida in 150 years. The last previous victim, in 1848, was a slave named Celia, put to death for killing the slavemaster who was also her father. The death penalty rampage thus revives the traditions of the darkest period of American history.

Only a week before, the state of Florida had carried out back-to-back executions of Gerald Stano, 46, and Leo Jones, 47, on March 23 and 24. Lawyers for Jones, who served more than 16 years on death row, argued for a stay of execution on the grounds that he had been wrongly convicted for the killing a Jacksonville police officer in 1981. But the Florida Supreme Court and a federal judge denied Jones's appeals giving the go-ahead for the execution.

The state of Virginia put to death a 35-year-old man, Ronald Watkins, on March 25, despite pleas for clemency from a number of national figures, including Rosalynn Carter, wife of former President Jimmy Carter, who cited Watkins's exemplary life while in prison.

The fifth execution in eight days is set for Tuesday morning. Daniel Remeta, 40, has been on death row for more than a decade for the 1985 killing of a convenience store clerk.

Florida had stopped executions in March 1997 after flames burst from the head of Pedro Medina during his execution. In October 1997 the Florida Supreme Court cleared the way for resumed use of the chair, and last month the court issued its final ruling that electrocution did not constitute cruel and unusual punishment. The electric chair had been rewired and Stano was its first victim.

Governor Lawton Chiles, a Democrat, has signed 31 death warrants since taking office in 1990. Florida now has the third largest death row in the nation, trailing only California and Texas in the number of inmates awaiting execution. While awaiting the court ruling on electrocution, anxious that some means of state killing should be available, Florida's state legislature rushed through a bill approving execution by lethal injection as a fallback method.

More than 400 prisoners have been executed throughout the United States in the 20 years since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty. Nearly 3,500 more wait on death row. The death penalty is used overwhelmingly against the poor and minorities.

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According to the Death Penalty Information Center about 90 percent of those facing capital charges cannot afford their own lawyer. Those who are executed are not the ones who have committed the worst crimes, but those given the worst lawyers.

Recently Congress and the Clinton administration eliminated federal funding for legal centers defending those on death row. Both the Democrats and the Republicans have vied with each other to expand the number of crimes qualifying for the death penalty, cut back on the appeals process and speed up executions.

The US remains only one of seven countries in the world that allows the execution of prisoners who were under the age of 18 at the time they committed a crime. It also permits the execution of the mentally retarded.

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