

Testimony before United Nations Human Rights Commission

Amnesty International condemns US for executions and police brutality

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At the opening of the United Nations Human Rights Commission's annual session last week, the human rights group Amnesty International denounced the United States for police brutality and its violation of human rights standards through the use of the death penalty.

"Human rights violations in the United States of America are persistent, widespread and appear to disproportionately affect people of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, " Amnesty International Secretary General Pierre Sane told the UN body. The US has also been condemned for its treatment of those seeking asylum from political persecution in their native countries.

For the first time, the human rights group placed the United States on its list of the world's worst violators of human rights, along with Turkey, Algeria, Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi and Congo. Since 1990 the US has executed 380 people, including 78 in the last year alone.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer reported that the European Union planned to submit an anti-death penalty resolution to the UN commission. Despite German government and international protests, the state of Arizona executed two German citizens earlier this year.

Tarja Halonen, Finland's foreign minister, called the death penalty "an inhuman form of punishment," and condemned those countries which execute minors. In the United States people have been executed for crimes committed before they were 18 years old.

In Virginia David Lee Fisher was put to death by lethal injection on March 25, following the denial of a stay of execution by the US Supreme Court and

rejection by Governor James Gilmore III of a request for clemency. Fisher, who maintained his innocence to the end, was the fourth man executed in Virginia since the beginning of the year. Six more executions are scheduled in the state over the next six weeks. Virginia executed 13 men in 1998. Only Texas has a higher rate of state killings, putting to death 20 people last year.

The US also executes the mentally ill and disabled. Mexican citizen Ramon Martinez-Villareal, convicted in 1983 for the murders of two farmworkers, is scheduled to be executed in Arizona on April 7. In an appeal for a halt to his execution Amnesty International writes: "Martinez-Villareal has a history of serious, long-term mental disorders and disabilities. He has been clinically diagnosed as schizophrenic, and has mild mental retardation, with an IQ of 64.... He also suffers from frontal lobe brain damage. The execution of individuals with such severe mental disabilities contravenes international human rights standards."

Charges of police brutality have focused recently on the New York Police Department. On February 4, West African immigrant Amadou Diallo, 22, was shot 41 times by officers of the NYPD Street Crimes Unit. The killing has provoked widespread protests against the police and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. In another case, jury selection is now under way in the trial of four New York police officers in the beating and torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in August 1997.



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