

Three prisoners set to die December 14 as US executions near 100 for the year

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14 December 1999

Three executions are scheduled in the US today. The state of Arkansas plans to put to death two men, Jack Greene and Andrew Sasser, and Robert Atworth is scheduled to die in Texas. These executions would bring the number of state killings nationwide to 99 for the year, more than in any year since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. At least two more executions are planned before the end of the year—Sammie Felder in Texas and Wendell Flowers in North Carolina.

Five men were executed last week, including four on December 9 alone. Put to death that day were Bobby Lynn Ross of Oklahoma, D.H. Fleenor of Indiana, James Beathard of Texas and Andre Graham of Virginia.

Andre Graham was convicted of the 1993 murder of 20-year-old Sheryl Stack. Governor Jim Gilmore rejected a clemency petition filed by Graham's lawyers that contended that another man fired the fatal shot. This was the fourteenth execution this year in Virginia. Only the state of Texas has sent more inmates to their deaths in 1999.

The day before, December 8, the state of Texas executed David Long, 46, who was convicted of the 1986 murders of three woman. Only the day before he had attempted suicide by ingesting a large number of prescription anti-depressants that he had been hoarding.

Long was taken from his hospital bed in Galveston, against his doctor's orders, and transported by plane to Huntsville, where he was executed by lethal injection. Long's lawyer, John Bloom, commented, "No doctor would release him from the hospital, but you have the spectacle of the state wheeling him out with a ventilator, tubes in his throat, so they can execute him." Texas spokesman Larry Fitzgerald justified the execution on the basis that Long's condition had been

upgraded from critical to serious condition.

Long's attorneys had filed motions to delay the execution at least until his mental state could be evaluated. They argued that he had been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic long before the recent attempt to kill himself. However, Dallas Judge Edwin King ruled that the suicide attempt did not "raise a significant question as to the defendant's competency to be put to death."

The US Supreme Court ruled in 1986 that the Constitution "prohibits the State from inflicting the penalty of death upon a prisoner who is insane." However, the high court also denied a stay of Long's execution. Richard Dieter of the Death Penalty Information Center stated, "It shocks the conscience that they would rush to execute someone who may not be aware of what is happening to him."

Long's execution brings to 33 the number of inmates executed in Texas this year alone. Texas Governor George W. Bush, who is seeking the Republican presidential nomination, has now presided over more than 100 executions.

In a related development, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, brother of George W. Bush, called for a special legislative session to consider changing the state's method of execution from the electric chair to lethal injection. Florida is one of four US states that utilizes the electric chair as the sole means of execution. The US Supreme Court is currently reviewing whether Florida's exclusive use of the electric chair constitutes "cruel and unusual punishment," which is prohibited by the US Constitution.

The state has a record of grisly executions with the electric chair. Allen Lee Davis, 54, was executed on July 8. Photos taken by the Florida Department of Corrections show blood coming from his face as a

leather mouthstrap was pushed up against his mouth and nose. It took several minutes for him to die.

Governor Bush and other Florida legislators are not motivated by humanitarianism in their moves to allow the method of lethal injection to put inmates to death. Rather, they hope that this change will allow the state to resume executions. While Florida executed 13 men in 1998, only one person has been executed by the state this year as the electric chair issue has worked its way through the court system. Jeb Bush is also seeking to shorten the time between prisoners' death sentences and their executions.

There are more than 3,500 prisoners on death row nationwide.



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