

# Florida legislature approves bill to speed executions

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Florida lawmakers passed a bill overhauling the state's death penalty laws last Friday, effectively speeding up the state's execution process. The legislation would streamline the appeals process by reducing the length of time between sentencing and execution to five years from the current average of 14 years. Republican Governor Jeb Bush, brother of Texas Governor and Republican presidential frontrunner George W. Bush, had urged passage of the bill at a special three-day legislative session.

The legislature also passed a bill that would allow condemned death row inmates to choose between lethal injection and the electric chair for their executions. The state previously used the electric chair as the sole means of execution. Executions in the state have been stalled as the US Supreme Court considers whether exclusive use of the electric chair constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. This followed a number of botched executions, one in which flames shot from the head of a condemned man as he was put to death last July.

There are currently 366 inmates on death row in Florida. The state has executed 44 people since the reinstatement of the death penalty in the US in 1976. Only Texas and Virginia have carried out more executions. Florida ranks first in the nation in the number of people—20—who have been taken off death row because of doubts about their convictions. With the passage of these two bills death penalty proponents seek to accelerate the rate of executions. Brad Thomas, advisor to Jeb Bush on the death penalty, commented to the *St. Petersburg Times* last week, "What I hope is that we become more like Texas. Bring in the witnesses, put them on a gurney, and let's rock and roll."

The new legislation will severely restrict appeals of Florida death row prisoners. Under current law,

condemned inmates are guaranteed an appeal to the Florida Supreme Court. Following that appeal, inmates have the right to file appeals on various issues, including adequacy of counsel, suppressed information and technical issues related to their trials. Under the new legislation these separate appeals would take place simultaneously, and inmates would only be allowed one technical appeal, outside of exceptional circumstances.

Ninety-eight people were put to death in the United States in 1999. Already in the new year three men have been put to death: Malcolm Rent Johnson in Oklahoma, January 6; David Ray Duren in Alabama, January 7; and Douglas C. Thomas in Virginia, January 10. Douglas Thomas, 26, was convicted of carrying out a double-murder at the age of 17. Three other inmates convicted of crimes committed when they were juveniles are scheduled to be carried out this month: Steve Roach in Virginia, January 13; Glen McGinnis in Texas, January 25; and Anzel Jones in Texas, January 26.

Fourteen juvenile offenders have been executed in the US since 1976. If the executions scheduled for January are carried out, they will set a record for the number of executions of juveniles in a single month since capital punishment was reinstated. Only one juvenile offender was put to death in 1999.

The US leads the world in the execution of prisoners for crimes committed before the age of 18. Of the 19 such known executions, 10 of these have been in the US. The other nine executions took place in Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The American Bar Association (ABA), Amnesty International and the European Union have all condemned the practice.

ABA President William Paul noted, "Many of the

young men on death row have crippling mental or behavioral disorders or have suffered horribly from physical, psychological and sexual abuse." Glen McGinnis, scheduled to be put to death in Texas on January 25, spent his childhood in a one-bedroom apartment with his crack-addicted mother, a prostitute, and a stepfather who beat and raped him. He lived on the street after running away from home at the age of 11. He fatally shot Leta Wilkerson, 30, at a coin laundry in August 1990 before stealing her van.

Sam Jordan, director of Amnesty International's Program to Abolish the Death Penalty, commented: "The irony here is that in 1899 the United States created the juvenile justice system on the premise that children in trouble should be treated differently than adults, and in the intervening 100 years, the rest of the world followed our lead. Then we turned 180 degrees."

Only the United States and Somalia have failed to ratify the 10-year-old UN Convention of the Rights of the Child which prohibits the death penalty for offenses committed by minors.



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