

Texas carries out first execution of 2015

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Arnold Prieto was the first Texas death row prisoner to be executed in 2015. The 41-year-old was pronounced dead at 6:31 p.m. local time on Wednesday, 20 minutes after being injected with a lethal dose of pentobarbital at the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville.

Prieto was convicted and sentenced to die for the fatal stabbings of Rodolfo Rodriguez, 72, his wife Virginia, 62, and Paula Moran, 90, the couple's former nanny. Prieto and an accomplice took jewelry and about \$300 in cash from the Rodriguez's San Antonio home.

No late appeals were filed on Prieto's behalf to halt his execution. At trial, Prieto rejected a plea deal for a sentence of less than life in prison if he would testify against the other man suspected in the deadly robbery. In his final statement before receiving the lethal injection, Prieto said, "There are no endings, only beginnings. Love y'all. See you soon."

Prieto was the fourth US death row inmate put to death so far this year. On January 13, Andrew Brannon was executed in Georgia. January 15 saw the lethal injections of two prisoners, Johnny Kormondy in Florida and Charles Warner in Oklahoma. The US Supreme Court declined to intervene in these three cases to stop the executions.

Texas has 12 more executions scheduled through April of this year, including two next week: Garcia White on January 28, and Robert Ladd on January 29. Since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in the US in 1976, Texas has sent 518 people to their deaths, far more than any other state and more than a third of the US total.

On January 25, 2013, Texas passed the grim milestone of 500 executions with the lethal injection of Kimberly McCarthy. Those executed in the Lone Star State have included six women, those convicted of crimes committed as juveniles, and the intellectually disabled.

Republican Governor Rick Perry, who left office on Tuesday, presided over a staggering 279 executions during his 14-year tenure. Perry's predecessor as governor, George W. Bush, oversaw 153 executions.

In the modern era, Texas has executed 13 foreign nationals, including eight Mexicans, and one each from the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Cuba and Canada. According to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), all but one of these men did not receive their consular rights, in violation of international law.

Since the death penalty's reinstatement by the nation's high court in 1976, 1,398 individuals have been sent to their deaths in the US states that continue to practice the death penalty. Texas, with 518 executions, is followed by Oklahoma, 112; Virginia, 110; Florida, 90; and Missouri, 80.

The 35 executions of 2014 were carried out by a handful of states: Texas and Missouri, 10 each; Florida, 8; Oklahoma, 3; Georgia, 2; and one each in Ohio and Arizona. Thirty-two states still practice capital punishment, along with the US federal government and the military legal system. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have outlawed capital punishment.

Last year's 35 executions were the fewest in the US in two decades. The comparatively smaller number, in part, reflects shifting public opinion on the death penalty. A 2013 Gallup poll found 60 percent of Americans favoring the death penalty for convicted murderers, down from a peak of 80 percent in 1994.

States still actively practicing the death penalty have faced a shortage of lethal chemicals for executions, as the main suppliers in Europe have dried up due to a European Union ban on exporting the drugs for use in executions. Experimentation by states of untested chemicals in lethal injections has resulted in a number of "botched" executions, in which condemned inmates have writhed on the gurney and cried out in pain during the barbaric procedure.

In one such case, on April 29, 2014, Oklahoma authorities injected prisoner Clayton Lockett with an untested cocktail of three lethal drugs. Lockett shook uncontrollably, gritted his teeth, and mumbled for nearly 15 minutes into the gruesome procedure. Prison authorities abruptly halted the execution, but Lockett died three quarters of an hour later.

The state of Oklahoma temporarily called a halt to executions while it overhauled its death penalty protocol. Last month, a US District Court judge ruled that the state killing machine could resume, clearing the way for the execution of Charles Warner on January 15. Warner was originally set to be put to death on the same day as Clayton Lockett last April, but his execution was put on hold for more than eight months waiting for the go-ahead from the courts.



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