

State of Arizona planning to execute death row inmates with Zyklon B gas

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The state of Arizona is reopening its gas chamber and preparing to use Zyklon B to execute death row inmates, according to documents published by *The Guardian* on Friday.

The Guardian report accompanying the documents that were obtained through a public records request shows that the Arizona department of corrections has spent more than \$2,000 to procure the ingredients to make cyanide gas.

According to receipts among the documents, the department paid \$1,530 to buy a block of potassium cyanide in December 2020 along with two other ingredients, sodium hydroxide pellets and sulfuric acid.

The documents also show that the state has taken extensive measures to refurbish its gas chamber that is housed at the Arizona State Prison Complex at Florence (ASPC—Florence) and built in 1949. The Arizona gas chamber has been idle for the past 22 years.

The purchase of the elements of Zyklon B and the revitalization of the ASPC—Florence gas chamber are part of a drive by the Republican-controlled state government to resume the execution of death row inmates. No one has been put to death in Arizona since the horrific bungled lethal injection of Joseph Wood in 2014.

Wood was injected 15 times and his execution lasted for approximately two hours on July 22-23, 2014. As he gasped and gulped for air for an estimated 660 times, lawyers filed an emergency appeal to the Supreme Court stating, “This execution has violated Mr. Wood’s Eighth Amendment right to be executed in the absence of cruel and unusual punishment.”

One of the Arizona documents is a draft entitled “Gas Chamber Protocol” and dated December 15, 2020. It describes in detail how an inmate is to be put to death

in the gas chamber with sodium cyanide pellets submerged into sulfuric acid as well as how the chamber is to be cleared of the gas with ammonia so that the executed prisoner can be removed.

The draft protocol includes the following: “The inmate shall be brought into the execution room and placed in the Chamber and strapped in the chair by the Restraint Team. The internal Chamber microphone will be turned on and a microphone will be affixed to the inmate’s shirt and also turned on; both microphones shall remain on until the completion of the execution ... to enable the persons in the witness room and the Special Operations Team Leader to hear any utterances or noises made by the inmate throughout the procedure. The Special Operations Team Leader will confirm that the microphones are functioning properly, and that the inmate can be heard in the operations room and in the witness room.”

The documents show that Arizona tested the “operability” of its mothballed gas chamber including checking the window and valve seals and using a smoke grenade as a deadly chemical gas simulator to check the negative pressure in the ASPC—Florence facility.

A “Rehabilitation and Reentry” memo dated December 17, 2020 describes a “candle test” that was administered by prison personnel on December 3. The memo states: “This was done by passing the flame of the candle slowly, and in close proximity to areas that have a sealing surface (i.e., door, windows, or any approved intrusions into the vessel) and observing if there are any deflections to the flame. There was no observed deflection of the flame which is indicative of an airtight environment.”

The last inmate to be gassed to death by Arizona was Walter LaGrand, a German national, for a 1982 armed

bank robbery in which a man was killed. LaGrand was executed in 1999 and, according to a published eyewitness account, he exhibited “agonizing choking and gagging” for 18 minutes and his head and arms twitched, and his hands were “red and clenched” before he died.

A report in *The Tucson Citizen* said, “The witness room fell silent as a mist of gas rose, much like steam in a shower, and Walter LaGrand became enveloped in a cloud of cyanide vapor. He began coughing violently—three or four loud hacks—and made a gagging sound before falling forward.”

Arizona currently has 115 prisoners on death row and two of them have been selected as candidates for the revived death penalty program. The inmates will be given a “choice” between the two gruesome ways to die: lethal injection or gas chamber. One of these inmates, Frank Atwood, is 65 years old and his attorney has stated that the investigation into his possible innocence has been delayed for more than a year due to the pandemic.

Atwood’s lawyer told *The Guardian* that “Neither option is tenable.” He also explained, “Frank Atwood is prepared to die. He is a man of Greek Orthodox faith and is preparing for this moment. But he does not want to be tortured and subjected to a botched execution.”

Zyklon B was used by the Nazis at the concentration camps Auschwitz and Majdanek, both in Poland, beginning in September 1941. It was originally used as a disinfectant and insecticide in the camps but proved far more efficient and deadly as an extermination tool than firing squads and other methods of mass execution.

The first captives of the Nazis put to death with Zyklon B were a group of 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 Polish prisoners who were unable to work. The prisoners were forced into the basement of Block 11 at Auschwitz I, known as the “death block,” where Zyklon B was released, and they all died within minutes. The decision to use Zyklon B was made by Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, and Adolf Eichmann, one of the German officers in charge of exterminating Jews and others.

Once the method was determined as achieving their objectives, the Nazis began selecting from among the Jews and other “undesirables” arriving on trains at Auschwitz, those who were deemed unfit for labor and

sent directly to the gas chambers. The Nazis concealed their plans from these victims by telling them that they were to undress for a bath. With the gas chamber disguised with showerheads, the prisoners were trapped behind a large door that sealed them inside.

The Zyklon B pellets were poured down an airshaft where they made contact with air and water and emitted deadly hydrogen cyanide gas. Within minutes everyone inside the chamber was dead from lack of oxygen. After the poison gas was evacuated from the chamber, other prisoners were forced to haul the corpses to a nearby room, where they removed hair, gold teeth, and fillings. The bodies were burned in ovens in the crematoria or buried in mass graves.

The use of the elements of Zyklon B by the state of Arizona for the purposes of gassing inmates to death is a gruesome indicator that American capitalism is more than capable of using the same methods of violence and barbarity, or worse, than those pioneered by the fascist regimes of Europe in World War II.



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