Christa Pike speaks out 1 month after Tennessee's failed attempt to execute her

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2 November 2026

"There hasn't been a moment since that night when I haven't been in pain," Christa Gail Pike said in her first public statement since the state of Tennessee's failed attempt to execute her on September 30. "My body hurts. ... I still struggle to speak."

The statement, which Pike dictated to her legal team and which her attorneys released Friday, says she is recovering, "but healing is not the same as being okay." She said she had been "deeply hurt by the incompetence" of those who carried out the procedure.

"Since that night, I have been largely isolated in the prison's medical ward, away from other people and the human connections that mean so much to me," Pike said.

Pike, 50, the only woman on Tennessee's death row, was returned to prison October 10 and is being held alone in the prison infirmary with no end date. Her attorneys filed an emergency federal motion Friday charging that the isolation violates a 2024 settlement that ended the 28 years she spent in solitary confinement.

Pike was 18 when she and her boyfriend, Tadaryl Shipp, 17, killed Colleen Slemmer, 19, a fellow student at the Knoxville Job Corps on January 12, 1995. Pike has never denied her role in the brutal killing. But her trial lawyers failed to present evidence of the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. In August, after years of branding her a liar, the state conceded it did not dispute her account of the abuse.

On September 30 the US Supreme Court lifted a stay issued hours earlier by the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals. Pike would have been the first woman executed in Tennessee in more than 200 years.

A sworn declaration dated October 15 by attorney Randy Spivey, who witnessed the procedure from inside the chamber, provides a minute-by-minute account.

Beginning at 6:34 p.m., the IV team struggled for nearly 50 minutes to establish a line, using about 10 needles. After the pentobarbital began flowing, Pike said her arm was burning and "about to bust." Her breathing grew labored, and she began snoring and choking, straining against the restraints. Officials administered a second dose before closing the curtain for good at 8:05 p.m.

When Spivey demanded that officials stop the execution rather than administer an unauthorized third dose, he was denied access to the witness room phone. The prison did not call 911 until 8:40 p.m., more than 50 minutes after witnesses saw Pike struggling. She left by ambulance at 9:28 p.m., her arms swollen, burned and blistered and was placed on a ventilator. On October 5, her attorneys were told she was believed to be brain-dead. She woke the next morning.

On October 7, Pike's attorneys appeared in court in Nashville seeking an order requiring the Tennessee Department of Correction to preserve all evidence related to the failed execution. Attorney Luke Ihnen argued the evidence would be crucial if the state tried to execute her again. The judge granted the request. A lawyer for the state told the court there is no pending execution order.

Will Tennessee try again? Republican Governor Bill Lee, who denied Pike clemency two days before the execution, called it "deeply disturbing," ordered an "independent" review and called off the state's only other execution this year. Prisons chief Frank Strada resigned. But Lee has rejected demands to commute Pike's sentence, saying he expects it to stand unless the courts decide otherwise, and Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti has given no assurance the state will not seek a new date.

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Lee leaves office in January. Senator Marsha Blackburn, the Republican running to succeed him, has called for bringing back the electric chair. John Yoo, author of the Bush administration's torture memos, said Tennessee should "go back and try again."

The horror in Nashville has not slowed the machinery of death. On October 7, Texas executed Jamaal Howard, the first execution in the US since Pike. Florida followed with James Robertson on October 13 and William Reaves Jr., a 77-year-old Vietnam veteran with PTSD, on October 20. Thirty-two people have been put to death in the US this year, more than half of them in Florida, which is on pace to break the record of 19 executions it set last year.

On October 6, President Donald Trump approved the execution by military firing squad of former Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, who killed 13 people and wounded 32 at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009. It would be the first US military execution since 1961. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth announced it would be livestreamed. "We'll make sure that people are able to watch it, that it's public," he said.

Trump called off the livestream October 15 after a poll found 80 percent of Americans opposed it. But the firing squad execution remains on schedule, and the very proposal to broadcast a state killing—reviving the public spectacle of the gallows—laid bare the barbaric instincts at the heart of the American ruling class.

Since returning to the White House, Trump has made the expansion of capital punishment a central plank of his authoritarian agenda, signing an executive order on Inauguration Day directing prosecutors to seek it. In 2025, 47 people were executed in the US, the most since 2009. The torture of Christa Pike, the planned spectacle at Fort Hood and the record pace of killings in Florida are not aberrations. They are the expression of a ruling class that, presiding over staggering social inequality and war, confronts every social problem with repression and answers it with the executioner.

Executions scheduled in the coming weeks include:

November 5: Jeffrey Weisheit, Indiana; Michael Taylor, Alabama; and Jesse Guardado, Florida—three executions in a single day, the second such day this year

November 12: John Rubio, Texas; and James Pavatt, Oklahoma

November 19: Thomas Overton, Florida; and Reinaldo Dennes, Texas

December 3: Nidal Malik Hasan, US military, by firing squad at Fort Hood

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