

US schedules five executions this week

By Kate Randall
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Five executions were planned this week in the United States, which would bring the total of state killings to 86 this year, more than any year since 1954. The US has executed 581 people since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976.

On October 15, the United States delivered its initial report on compliance with the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment to the UN Committee Against Torture. The report stated that the death penalty "remains a matter of great importance and vigorous public debate" in the country, but that the government "considers the issue of capital punishment to be outside the scope of its reporting obligations under this Convention." In other words, the US intends to continue executing inmates, in violation of international law and conventions on the death penalty.

Also earlier this month, the US Solicitor General filed a Supreme Court brief urging it not to consider whether the US should stop executions of people for crimes committed when they were juveniles. Since 1976, 13 juvenile offenders have been put to death in the US. The Death Penalty Information Center reports that worldwide between 1986 and 1993 there have been 22 known executions of juveniles, in countries such as Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

On Wednesday, the state of Arizona carried out the execution of Ignacio Alberto Ortiz, 57. Ortiz was convicted of the 1978 murder of Manuelita McCormack in Tucson. Six people have been put to death in Arizona this year. Last month Germany announced that it was suing the US in the International Court of Justice in The Hague for violating international laws and treaties by executing two German nationals, Karl and Walter LaGrand, in Arizona earlier this year. Germany says that the two brothers were denied consular access as required under the Vienna Convention. German Justice Minister Herta

Daeubler-Gmelin said, "The obligation to respect international laws is valid for everyone.... Respecting international law cannot be a one-way street."

The planned Wednesday execution of Anthony Bryan in the state of Florida was halted by a Supreme Court decision Tuesday to consider whether the state's exclusive use of the electric chair for executions amounts to cruel and unusual punishment, which is forbidden by the Eighth Amendment to the US Constitution. Lawyers for Bryan, convicted of the 1983 murder of a security guard, argue that Florida's electric chair presents an "unacceptable risk of physical violence, disfigurement and torment."

Bryan's attorneys called attention to "documented and repeated malfunctioning of the electric chair," causing "ghastly spectacles of violent disfigurement." Executions in Florida's electric chair have caused blood to spurt from condemned inmates' faces and flames to ignite from headpieces worn during the procedure. Andrew Thomas, a state death penalty appeals lawyer representing Bryan, commented, "The Humane Society won't allow animals to be put to death by electrocution. That says something."

The Supreme Court has not ruled on the constitutionality of a method of execution since 1890, when the first person was put to death in the newly invented electric chair. Methods of execution in the US include lethal injection, electrocution, hanging, firing squad and the gas chamber.

Domingo Cantu, Jr. was scheduled to die by lethal injection in Texas on Thursday after DNA test results failed to exonerate him in the 1988 rape and murder of Suda Eller Jones. Cantu would be the twenty-eighth person to be executed in Texas this year. Texas has carried out 191 executions since 1976, the most of any state.

Also on Thursday, Michael Williams was scheduled to be executed in Virginia. The state has put 12 people

to death this year, for a total of 71 since 1976, second only to Texas. Richard Johnson's execution was scheduled by South Carolina for Friday, the second execution in the state this year. Twenty-two people have been put to death in South Carolina since 1976.

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