



For Immediate Release

December 12, 2005

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### **Tookie Williams execution underscores moral hypocrisy of death penalty system in U.S.**

**Atlanta, GA** – The decision by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to deny clemency for Stanley “Tookie” Williams represents but the latest example of moral hypocrisy in the administration of the death penalty in the United States. Williams, a former gang leader, had renounced his former life and devoted himself to anti-gang efforts while on death row. “At a time when gang violence and murder continue to plague inner city neighborhoods across the country, the choice to let Tookie Williams die sends an unmistakable message about the state’s skewed priorities,” says Ajamu Baraka, executive director of the U.S. Human Rights Network. “To execute one of the nation’s most effective spokesmen against gang violence is to effectively condemn hundreds more poor, black youth to the same fate.”

The decision mirrors numerous others in states where compelling cases for clemency were rejected without explanation. In North Carolina, for example, Elias Syriani was executed on November 18 for murdering his wife despite pleas from the victims – his four children – who told Governor Mike Easley that the execution would victimize them a second time. “Clemency, redemption, mercy and rehabilitation are supposed to be integral parts of the U.S. criminal justice system,” says Rick Halperin, chairman of the board of directors of Amnesty International USA. “But clemency has become mere window dressing in death penalty cases.”

The next pending execution in California will again challenge Schwarzenegger’s moral fiber: Clarence Ray Allen, scheduled to die on January 17, is 75 years old, legally blind and confined to a wheelchair, presenting a threat to no one. The scheduled execution of 77-year-old John Nixon in Mississippi next week prompted a former Mississippi state Supreme Court Justice to say that his lethal injection would be an affront to “the moral values of our people.”

The absence of a meaningful clemency process compounds the systemic flaws with the administration of capital punishment that have emerged as consistent patterns over the past decade, including wrongful convictions, racial bias, incompetent counsel, prosecutorial misconduct and condemnation of the mentally ill. Rather than address these problems, Congress is now debating new restrictions on the right of *habeas corpus*, which would further limit appeals for those on death row and inevitably yield new waves of injustice. “With all of the problems associated with the capital punishment system in

this country the latest move to gut *habeas corpus* shows that our elected representatives are truly pandering to the lowest common denominator of violence, revenge and fear,” Halperin says.

Gov. Schwarzenegger’s decision to let Tookie Williams die is another missed opportunity for a political leader in this country to demonstrate real moral leadership. “It demeans us when we let killers turn us into killers,” says Renny Cushing, Executive Director of the victim rights group Murder Victims Families for Human Rights, “No one is served by a system that is so rigid that it does not allow for mercy and grace.”

“The fatally flawed administration of the death penalty in this country amounts to a continual human rights violation,” says Baraka. “Most of the world’s nations have recognized that creating a perfect death-penalty system is impossible and have abolished capital punishment. It is time for us to admit the truth and follow suit.”

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