

Death row population at 30-year low

Opponents claim the decline reflects changing public opinion, but supporters say it's just a matter of numbers

BY LAURA MECKLER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The number of people sentenced to death reached a 30-year low in 2003, when the death row population fell for the third year in a row, the government reported Sunday.

Some 144 inmates in 25 states were given the death penalty last year, 24 fewer than in 2002 and less than half the average of 297 between 1994 and 2000, according to the Justice Department.

Death penalty opponents say the report shows how wary the public is of executions, heightened by publicity about those wrongly convicted and concerns about whether the punishment is administered fairly. Illinois emptied its death row in 2003 after several inmates were found to be innocent.

"What we're seeing is hesitation on the death penalty, skepticism, reluctance," said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center. "I do think there is some concern about the death penalty and it's reflected in death sentences from juries."

Opponents also point to other possible reasons, including continuing fallout from Supreme Court

decisions requiring that juries be told life in prison without parole is an alternative to death.

Dieter said 47 states now offer a life-without-parole sentence as an option for at least some convictions, compared with 30 in 1993.

Supporters doubt the decline signifies a major shift in public opinion about the death penalty, which is in effect in 38 states and the federal justice system.

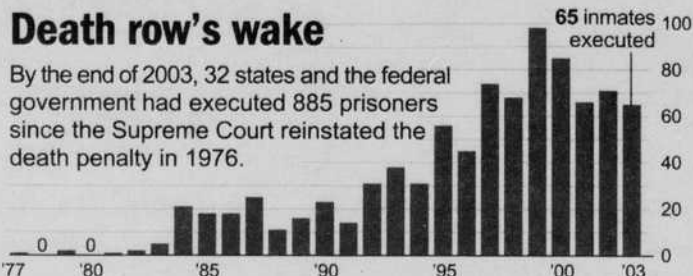
"I don't think the numbers mean a lot, quite frankly," said Dianne Clements, president of the victims advocacy group Justice For All. "I don't think it means a change in death penalty attitudes. I think it means the numbers change."

At the end of last year, 3,374 prisoners were awaiting execution, 188 fewer than in 2002, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Illinois accounted for 84 percent of the decline, the result of then-Gov. George Ryan's decision to commute the death sentences of 167 inmates to life in prison and to pardon four others.

Nationally, 267 people were removed from death row last year. That was the largest drop since 1976, when the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, according to the report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

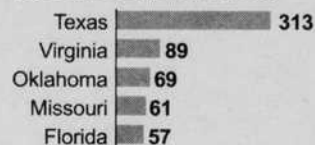
Death row's wake

By the end of 2003, 32 states and the federal government had executed 885 prisoners since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.



During this 27-year period, five states accounted for two-thirds of the executions.

States with the most executions, 1977-2003



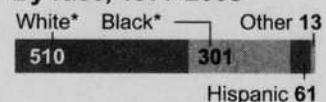
States with capital punishment

As of December 2003

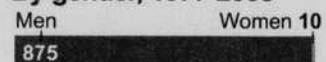
All but 12 states and the District of Columbia authorize the death penalty.



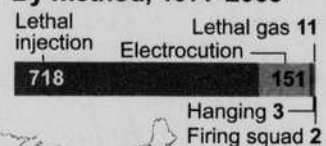
By race, 1977-2003



By gender, 1977-2003



By method, 1977-2003



* Excludes people of Hispanic origin
SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics

AP

Iraq: Prime Minister Allawi defends his decision to strike

Continued from page 1

decision to order the attack on Fallujah, saying he decided to strike after security forces arrested "two very important" terrorist organizations. He did not elaborate.

Allawi said up to 400 insurgents have been captured, including fighters from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Morocco, but he gave no figures.

Despite the ongoing violence, Allawi ordered Baghdad International Airport to reopen Sunday and

opened all but one border crossing with Syria. They were closed under a state of emergency announced Nov. 7 on the eve of the Fallujah attack.

In Fallujah, U.S. Marines reclaimed the infamous bridge over the Euphrates River where Iraqis strung up the charred bodies of two American contractors in March.

On Sunday, Marine and Army units were still battling small bands of militants scattered in buildings and bunkers across the Sunni Muslim stronghold.

State budget hole looms large for 2005-07

THE PROBLEM: State revenue is expected to be about \$1 billion short of funding services at current levels in the 2005-07 budget.

THE CAUSE: Oregon's slow economic recovery isn't bringing in much new tax

revenue, while costs of services rise because of inflation and population growth.

THE SOLUTIONS: Gov. Ted Kulongoski's proposed budget is expected to set spending priorities and pay by shifting money around; taxpayers have defeated the last two tax increase attempts.

— The Associated Press

Ivory Coast: Young Patriots militia calls for 'human shield'

Continued from page 3

more than year-old cease-fire in the country's 2-year-old civil war with airstrikes on the rebel-held north.

Warplanes bombed a French peacekeeping post in the north on Nov. 6, killing nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker and plunging the country into chaos.

France wiped out Ivory Coast's newly built-up airport on the tarmac. The retaliation unleashed a violent loyalist uprising, with the Gbagbo-allied militia Young Patriots leading looting, burning and attacks targeting the French.

No deaths have been reported among French or other non-African foreigners targeted by the militia. France says attackers raped several expatriates.

The Associated Press and hospitals confirmed at least 17 deaths in the rioting, all or most among Ivoirians.

Gbagbo's government claims

62 of its supporters were killed, many of them when French forces opened fire on anti-French demonstrations in Abidjan.

On Sunday, a few Young Patriots manned roadblocks around Gbagbo's lagoon-side mansion and maintained a vigil outside state broadcasting offices nearby.

Fearing an overthrow attempt by France, the Gbagbo-allied militia have called for a "human shield" around the two sites until French troops leave Ivory Coast.

Chirac said Sunday in Marseille that the 4,000 French peacekeepers would remain, alongside a more than 6,000-man U.N. peace force.

Gbagbo late Saturday put hard-liner Col. Maj. Philippe Mangou in charge of the country's military. It was Mangou who oversaw the air campaign that reopened Ivory Coast's civil war and opened the confrontation with France.

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