

WORLD & NATION

Supreme Court prayer



Reuters/CNS

Bernadette Whittaker, 15, from Front Royal, Va., prays while holding an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in front of the Supreme Court building in Washington Dec. 11, the day before the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Inside, justices were hearing arguments in the landmark post-election legal battle — *Bush vs. Gore* — which could be decisive in the outcome of the contested Nov. 7 presidential election.

Freedom

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The commission also notes that the State Department's annual report on religious freedom describes several countries where conditions have deteriorated, but the U.S. policies toward them have not been adjusted.

"The (State Department) report also illustrates a number of instances where U.S. policy does not appear to be in line with the gravity of religious freedom problems in a particular country," the commission said.

For instance, it says the State Department "bluntly and accurately reports that the Chinese government's attitude toward religious freedom has deteriorated and persecution of religious minorities has increased. The report reflects this situation in almost excruciating detail."

Arrests of people for practicing religion,

executions of Muslims, deteriorating receptivity of the Chinese government to U.S. concerns about religious freedom, and the denial of visas for State Department personnel to visit Tibet were cited as examples.

"It is distressing that the administration and majorities of both houses of Congress were willing to overlook all of this in pursuing a campaign for permanent normal trade relations status for China," the commission said.

At a Dec. 8 press conference where the commission report was released, chairman Elliot Abrams said there are some understandable reasons for how the administration responds to religious freedom issues.

"The law is new, this effort is new," he said. "It's new to the secretary of state, to the president, to policy makers. The effort to integrate religious freedom concerns into foreign policy itself is new. We hope it will get better."

And it's not that the president and his staff do not care, Abrams added.

Garza death delayed; Clinton seeks analysis

WASHINGTON (CNS)—Opponents of the death penalty say they plan to keep pressing President Clinton to commute death sentences or declare a moratorium in the wake of his decision to delay for six months what was to have been the first federal execution in 37 years.

Juan Raul Garza, 44, was to have been executed at the federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Ind., on Dec. 12, but Clinton announced Dec. 7 it would be delayed.

Churches, the federal prison and activists in the area had been preparing everything from prayer vigils to shuttle bus service in anticipation of crowds both opposing and supporting the execution.

Karen Burkhart, an Indiana Catholic who organizes events protesting capital punishment, told Catholic News Service Dec. 11 that activists would continue encouraging the president to declare a moratorium on all federal executions.

"It's good that he granted a stay for Juan Garza, but he needs to do more for the rest of them," Burkhart said.

In his announcement, Clinton said although he believes the death penalty is appropriate for some crimes, he thinks the Justice Department needs more time to analyze information about racial and geographic disparities in the federal death penalty system.

"Whether one supports the death penalty or opposes it, there should be no question that the gravity and finality of the penalty demand that we be certain that when it is imposed, it is imposed fairly," Clinton said.

He asked the Justice Department to re-

port to the next president by April with an analysis of racial and geographic disparities in how the federal death penalty is applied.

Garza's pending execution had led religious leaders including Pope John Paul II, the president of the U.S. bishops' conference, the bishops of Indiana and several interfaith coalitions to plead with the president to commute Garza's sentence to life in prison without possibility of parole.

Garza, a marijuana smuggler, was convicted under federal anti-drug kingpin statutes of killing one person in Texas and ordering the murders of two others. His execution was to be in Terre Haute, the only federal prison equipped for it.

Some people who wrote to Clinton noted that the execution date for Garza, a Mexican-American Catholic, was particularly inappropriate — the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of Mexico and all of the Americas.

"This day is the great feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Americas, who appeared before a peasant to share the Good News that God has special concern for the poor and forgotten," Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Clinton. "Despite their horrible crimes, the men and women on our nation's death rows are often themselves poor and forgotten."

In the Dec. 5 letter to Clinton, Bishop Fiorenza, wrote that commuting death sentences would have even greater significance in the Jubilee Year, referring to Clinton's efforts on debt relief for poor countries.

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