



Amnesty International

Group 524

February 2022



No February Meeting Urgent Action: Leonard Peltier Passing of Thich Nhat Hanh

Welcome

I hope all are well and have recovered from the latest ice storm that February has brought. This month's focus is on Native American Leonard Peltier and the passing of a world-renowned activist Buddhist monk from Vietnam.

Leonard Peltier

Leonard Peltier, a 77-year-old Native American man who has been imprisoned in the USA for 45 years and has a clemency petition pending before President Joe Biden, has contracted COVID-19. This heightens concern for Leonard Peltier's life and well-being given his age and serious underlying health conditions. Details are on page 2 and 3 and a model letter to President Biden is on page 4.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Vietnamese monk who popularized mindfulness in the West and whose vast peace writings introduced countless people to Buddhist ideas and practices, died Jan. 22, 2022, at the age of 95. An excerpt from the National Catholic Reporter is on page 5.

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Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.

Meeting Location: Providence Heights

9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Belch (joheb@aol.com or 412-766-1894) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA web site (www.amnestyusa.org) and Group 39's Amnesty Pittsburgh web site (www.amnestypgh.org).



Urgent Action: Leonard Peltier, Seeking Clemency, Contracts COVID

Leonard Peltier, a 77-year-old Native American man who has been imprisoned in the USA for 45 years and has a clemency petition pending before President Joe Biden, has contracted COVID-19. This heightens concern for Leonard Peltier's life and well-being given his age and serious underlying health conditions. Amnesty International urges President Biden to grant Leonard Peltier clemency on humanitarian grounds.



Background

Leonard Peltier, an Anishinaabe-Lakota Native American, was a member of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which promotes Native American rights. On June 26, 1975, during a confrontation involving AIM members on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota, two FBI agents were shot dead. Leonard Peltier was convicted of their murders in 1977 and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. Leonard Peltier has always denied killing the agents.



A key alleged eyewitness to the shootings was Myrtle Poor Bear, a Lakota Native woman. Her statement that she saw Leonard Peltier kill both FBI agents led to his extradition from Canada, where he had fled. However, Myrtle Poor Bear later retracted her statement. She was not called as a prosecution witness at trial, but the trial judge refused to allow the defense to call her as a witness on the grounds that her testimony “could be highly prejudicial to the government”. In 2000, Myrtle Poor Bear said that her original statement was the result of months of threats and harassment from FBI agents.

To date, the US Parole Commission has denied him parole on the grounds that he did not accept criminal responsibility for the two murders. This is despite the Commission acknowledging that “the prosecution has conceded the lack of any direct evidence that you personally participated in the executions of two FBI agents”. In a letter to President Biden in July 2021, James H. Reynolds, the US Attorney whose office handled the prosecution and appeal of Leonard Peltier, urged the President to commute the sentence of a man “I helped to put behind bars”. He said that Leonard Peltier’s “conviction and continued incarceration is a testament to a time and a system of justice that no longer has a place in our society”. He urged the President to “chart a different path in the history of the government’s relationship with its Native people through a show of mercy rather than continued indifference”.

Leonard Peltier has a variety of ailments, including kidney disease, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, a heart condition, a degenerative joint disease, and constant shortness of breath and dizziness. A stroke in 1986 left him virtually blind in one eye. In January 2016, doctors diagnosed him with a life-threatening condition: a large and potentially fatal abdominal aortic aneurysm that could rupture at any time and would result in his death.

Leonard Peltier was denied clemency by President George W. Bush in January 2009, and by President Barack Obama in January 2017. His attorney filed a new clemency petition before President Joe Biden in July 2021. A decision is still pending. On January 26, 2022, the Chairperson of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Senator Brian Schatz, wrote to the President urging him to commute Leonard Peltier’s sentence, due to “(1) his old age and critical illness, (2) the amount of time he has already served, and (3) the unavailability of other remedies.” Senator Schatz commended the Biden administration’s “commitment to righting past wrongs in our criminal justice system” and urged commutation of Leonard Peltier’s sentence in keeping with this work for “a fair and constitutionally sound justice system”. In October 2021 eleven members of the US Congress called on President Biden to release him. In November 2021, Senator Patrick Leahy had also said that he supported Leonard Peltier’s release from prison.

In 2015, several Nobel Peace Prize winners—including the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu—called for Leonard Peltier’s release. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and the National Congress of American Indians have also called for his release. Due to the numerous issues at trial, the exhaustion of legal avenues for appeal, the amount of time he has already served, along with his chronic health issues, Amnesty International has long supported clemency for Leonard Peltier.

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President Joseph Biden
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500, USA

Dear Mr. President,

The news that 77-year-old Native American activist Leonard Peltier has contracted COVID-19 in federal prison has greatly heightened concern for his well-being given his age and his serious medical conditions, including diabetes, kidney disease and a heart ailment.

Pending before you is Leonard Peltier's clemency petition in which he seeks commutation of his sentence. Many have called for his release over the years on humanitarian grounds, including the National Congress of American Indians and several Nobel laureates, including the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Most recently, the Chairperson of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Senator Brian Schatz, has urged you to grant clemency, in line with your administration's commitment to "righting past wrongs" in the criminal justice system.

Leonard Peltier has always maintained his innocence of the murder of two FBI agents during a confrontation with members of the American Indian Movement on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota in 1975. There are serious concerns about the fairness and reliability of proceedings leading to his trial and conviction in 1977. These concerns have led the former US Attorney who supervised the prosecution team post-trial to call for clemency.

Even without the serious additional serious factor of COVID-19, there remain deep concerns about Leonard Peltier's deteriorating health.

I urge you to grant Leonard Peltier clemency on humanitarian grounds and as a matter of justice.

Sincerely,



Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, teacher of mindfulness and nonviolence, dies at age 95

Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Vietnamese monk who popularized mindfulness in the West and whose vast peace writings introduced countless people to Buddhist ideas and practices, died Jan. 22, 2022, at the age of 95 at Từ Hiếu Pagoda, the Buddhist temple in Hue, Vietnam, where he entered monastic life at the age of 16 and returned to prepare for his death in 2019.

Forced into exile in the 1960s, he lived and taught overseas for more than five decades, speaking out for nonviolence as a way of life while teaching his mindfulness meditation practices.

Martin Luther King Jr. considered Nhất Hạnh a friend and nominated him for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize. Years later, [Oprah Winfrey interviewed him](#), saying he had deeply influenced her thinking.

Fr. [Peter Phan](#), who holds the Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University and is also a Vietnam native, said he is grateful for the monk's peace and justice work and for his spiritual guidance to millions of persons of different religious traditions.

As anti-war activities grew in the U.S. and news of Nhất Hạnh's peace activities spread beyond Vietnam, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an umbrella group of nonviolent organizations dating to the mid-1930s, [invited him in 1966](#) to visit the U.S.

That trip would be historic, as during it Nhất Hạnh first encountered both Martin Luther King and Trappist monk Thomas Merton. The three men bonded in their pursuits of peace and nonviolence. Those encounters, while short-lived, were influential.

King, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1964, was influenced by Nhất Hạnh, and on Jan. 25, 1967, wrote a letter to the Nobel committee [nominating Nhất Hạnh for the peace prize](#).

The full article is available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/buddhist-monk-thich-nhat-hanh-teacher-mindfulness-and-nonviolence-dies-age-95>



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (left), in a Chicago news conference with Thích Nhất Hạnh (center), calls for a halt in bombing of Vietnam on May 31, 1966.