

# *U.S. attorney general freezes all federal executions*

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**Trump's attorney general, William Barr, resumed the use of capital punishment last year after a 17-year hiatus [File: Bryan Woolston/Reuters]**

Washington, July 2 (RHC)-- U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland has ordered a moratorium on federal executions while the Justice Department continues its review of the death penalty, the department said in a statement.

"The Department of Justice must ensure that everyone in the federal criminal justice system is not only afforded the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States, but is also treated fairly and humanely," Garland said in the statement on Thursday. "That obligation has special force in capital

cases.”

Garland’s predecessor, William Barr, resumed the use of capital punishment last year after a 17-year hiatus. In the waning months of the administration of President Donald Trump, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) carried out 13 executions, as the COVID-19 pandemic raged throughout the federal prison system and sickened some of the prisoners on death row and even some of their lawyers.

The 13 executions during Trump’s tenure – carried out beginning in July 2020 and ending just days before Trump left office on January 20, 2021 – exceeded the executions undertaken by any other U.S. president since the 19th century.

Under Barr’s directive, the BOP switched to using pentobarbital as part of a new single-drug protocol to administer the lethal injection. Previously, the government had used a combination of three drugs to carry out executions, but that protocol was abandoned because of a shortage of one of the drugs, an anaesthetic called sodium thiopental.

Defence lawyers and capital punishment critics have raised concerns about the use of pentobarbital, which can cause a drowning sensation as it rapidly damages capillaries in the lungs, according to autopsies of executed inmates.

Garland said on Thursday that he was directing Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco to lead a review that will assess, among other things, the Justice Department’s 2019 single-drug protocol as well as “the risk of pain and suffering associated with the use of pentobarbital.” The review will also scrutinise changes the Justice Department made to its regulations in November 2020 that expanded the methods it could use to carry out executions.

President Joe Biden pledged during his campaign to support legislation to end the death penalty. Garland has previously said he has concerns about the practice, though some criminal justice reform advocates have criticised the administration for not taking swift enough action.

Garland said last month he was personally reviewing the department’s processes dealing with the death penalty. He told his Senate confirmation hearing in February he had concerns about innocent people being executed and about the disparate impact of the death penalty on Black Americans.

There are currently 46 inmates on federal death row, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Of those, 20 are white, 18 are Black, seven are Latino and one is Asian.

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