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## COURT REFUSES TO ALLOW INTERNATIONAL LAW TO TRUMP U.S. CRIMINAL LAWS

*(Medellin v. State of Texas, No. 06-984)*

The U.S. Supreme Court this week refused to permit a criminal defendant, properly convicted of murder and sentenced to death, to invoke international law as a basis for overturning his conviction. The Court's decision in *Medellin v. State of Texas* was a victory for the Washington Legal Foundation (WLF), which filed a brief urging the Court to reject the appeal. WLF argued that a Mexican citizen convicted of raping and murdering two teenage girls in 1993 has received more than a fair review of his sentence and that it is time now to bring his appeal rights to a close.

WLF filed its brief on behalf of Randy and Sandy Ertman, the parents of one of the murder victims: 14-year-old Jenny Ertman. WLF also filed on behalf of the Allied Educational Foundation. The Supreme Court held that neither the International Court of Justice (ICJ) nor President Bush have the authority to order Texas courts to reconsider the conviction and death sentence.

"The defendant has attempted to delay his execution by invoking the ruling of an international court. But U.S. courts are supposed to base their decisions on American law, not international law," said WLF Chief Counsel Richard Samp after reviewing the Supreme Court's decision. "Where, as here, a defendant was convicted of murder 14 years ago and every appellate court has concluded that he received a fair trial, he should not be permitted to continue to delay his sentence by invoking a new, international-law issue that he failed to raise until years after his initial conviction," Samp said.

The case involves Jose Ernesto Medellin, a Mexican citizen who has lived virtually all his life in Houston. Prior to his arrest in this case at age 18, he had a lengthy history of violent gang activity. In June 1993, 14-year-old Jenny Ertman and 16-year-old Elizabeth Pena had the misfortune of encountering Medellin's gang while walking home. Although the two girls were total strangers, the gang members brutally raped both girls for more than an hour before strangling them with their shoelaces so that they could not report the attacks. Medellin was arrested for the crimes after boasting about his acts to numerous acquaintances. He was read his *Miranda* rights and then confessed to involvement in the crimes. A jury convicted him of capital murder and sentenced him to death in October 1994. Every court that has reviewed his case since then has determined that he received a fair trial.

Medellin never mentioned at the time of his arrest and at trial that he was not a U.S. citizen. He first mentioned that fact in 1998, when he sought to overturn his conviction based on alleged violation of his rights under the Vienna Convention, which provides that anyone arrested outside of his native country must be informed of his right to communicate with consular officials representing his native country. Because Medellin was not told when arrested that he had a right to communicate with Mexican officials, he claimed that his subsequent conviction could not be allowed to stand. The Texas courts refused to consider Medellin's claims, ruling that he had waived them by waiting four years to raise them; this week's Supreme Court decision affirmed that ruling.

In the meantime, Mexico filed suit against the United States before the International Court of Justice, claiming that American police had failed to inform arrested Mexicans in 54 capital cases (including Medellin's case) of their rights under the Vienna Convention. Despite claims by the U.S. that the ICJ lacked jurisdiction over the matter and had no power to interfere with the internal workings of American criminal courts, the ICJ ruled in favor of Mexico. It ruled that American courts must give each of the Mexicans a full hearing on their claims that they were prejudiced in some way by the failure to let them know of their right to contact Mexican consular officials. At that point, President Bush took Medellin's side of the dispute and directed the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals to consider the merits of Medellin's Vienna Convention claim. When the Texas court refused to do so, Medellin took his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, asking that the Texas court be ordered to hear his claim.

In its ruling this week, the Supreme Court held that decisions of the ICJ do not create law binding on U.S. courts because the Senate, in ratifying relevant treaties, never indicated that ICJ rulings should be deemed a part of U.S. law. The Court also agreed with WLF that President Bush lacks the power to require Texas courts, in violation of long-standing Texas procedural rules, to re-hear Medellin's case.

WLF is a public interest law and policy center with supporters in all 50 states, including Texas. It devotes a significant portion of its resources to protecting the rights of crime victims and ensuring that American courts decide cases based on American law.

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For further information, contact WLF Chief Counsel Richard Samp, (202) 588-0302. A copy of WLF's brief is posted on its web site, [www.wlf.org](http://www.wlf.org).