

Mentally Ill Death Row Inmate Gets Last-Minute Execution Stay

A U.S. appeals court on Wednesday issued a stay of execution for a mentally ill Texas death row inmate just hours before he was set to be put to death for the murders of two people in a case that garnered international attention.

Lawyers for Scott Panetti had argued his life should be spared, saying the execution of a severely mentally ill man would be morally and legally wrong. They asked the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals to issue the stay to allow for a competency hearing.

Panetti, 56, was convicted of fatally shooting his wife's parents in the central Texas town of Fredericksburg in 1992. Panetti shaved his head, sawed off a shotgun and broke into the home of Joe and Amanda Alvarado, killing the two with his wife and daughter witnessing him shoot dead his mother-in-law, the Texas attorney general said.

No date or details of the competency hearing have been set. Legal sources said Texas was not planning an immediate appeal and will present its arguments when a schedule is determined by the court.

U.N. human rights experts on Tuesday called on Texas to halt the execution. Major Texas newspapers, including the Houston Chronicle and Dallas Morning News, have said in editorials that the execution of a seriously mentally ill inmate would be inexcusable.

Panetti donned a cowboy suit and represented himself at his 1995 trial, often speaking incoherently and seeking to call Jesus Christ and President John F. Kennedy as defense

witnesses.

Lawyers for Panetti had launched last-ditch appeals for the man they say is delusional. He was hospitalized a dozen times for psychosis and delusions in the six years leading up to the crime, they said.

"We are grateful that the court stayed tonight's scheduled execution of Scott Panetti, a man who has suffered from schizophrenia for three decades, for a careful review of the issues surrounding his competency," said one of his lawyers, Kathryn Kase.

The Texas attorney general's office has said that courts have ruled Panetti competent to stand trial and to be executed.