



CIVIL RIGHTS-ERA CRIMES REVISITED

June 27, 2005

A Mississippi judge sentenced former Ku Klux Klan member Edgar Ray Killen to 60 years in prison Thursday for the 1964 killings of three civil rights workers whose deaths helped inspire the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The three men - James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner - were in Philadelphia, Miss. as part of a group of young activists known as freedom riders who traveled by bus through the South registering black voters during "Freedom Summer" of 1964.

Congress had recently abolished the poll tax under the 24th Amendment making it easier for poor blacks to vote.

The three were arrested on a speeding charge and following their release, ambushed, tortured and shot to death by a group of Klansmen organized by Killen.

'Atonement trials'

Killen's trial is the latest of several high-profile cases aimed at righting past wrongs committed in the United States in the decades leading up to and during the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1994 a Mississippi jury convicted Byron de la Beckwith for the 1963 assassination of NAACP official Medgar Evers.

In 2002, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Frank Cherry were convicted of murder for a 1963 Birmingham, Ala., church bombing that killed four black Sunday school students Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley. The killings inspired race riots in Birmingham.

Most recently, on June 1, authorities exhumed the body of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was beaten and murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman in Money, Miss. Mississippi authorities performed an autopsy on Till's body in the hopes of opening an investigation into the murder. Results are still pending.

"The fact that the white South wants to pursue these [decades-old] cases indicates that many people want to get right on the racial question and repent for the history that these miscarriages of justice have represented," Harry Watson, director of the Center for the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill told The

Christian Science Monitor. "As a result, they are feeling an immense burden lifted off them."

Congress recently joined in the atonement effort. On June 13, the Senate issued a formal apology for its failure to pass legislation making lynching, or mob killings, a federal crime.

Though many criticized the move for falling short of apologizing for slavery, many saw the apology as an end to an era of hate crimes overlooked by the U.S. government.

Apology/conviction not enough

Following Edgar Ray Killen's conviction, the widow of Michael Schwerner, Rita Bender, criticized members of the jury for failing to hand down a murder conviction rather than the lesser charge of manslaughter. A manslaughter charge makes Killen responsible for the deaths of the men but stops at saying he actually committed the murders.

"The fact that some members of this jury could have sat through that testimony, indeed could have lived here all these years and could not bring themselves to acknowledge that these were murders, that they were committed with malice, indicates that there are still people unfortunately among you who choose to look aside, who choose to not see the truth," she said.

Others have questioned the necessity of apologizing for actions taken in the past.

"I don't think I'll get in the business of apologizing for acts that previous Senates took," Republican Sen. Chad Cochran of Mississippi said when asked why he failed to sign onto the Senate's lynching bill.

-- Compiled by Kristina Nwazota for NewsHour Extra

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