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George W Bush has overseen more than 130 executions in Texas

Opponents of the death penalty have organised a mass petition urging moratoriums on capital punishment throughout the world.

The petition, with 3.5 million signatures, is to be handed to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York on Monday.

It comes as a powerful advocate of capital punishment, George W Bush, prepares to take office in the White House.

Although many governments have abolished the death penalty, executions remain legal in about 90 countries.

Signatories to the petition, which has been organised by the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio, say that the death penalty is a denial of the universal right to life and that it dehumanises the world by putting vengeance first.

The Dalai Lama, Indonesian President Abdurahman Wahid and Italian film director Roberto Benigni are among those who signed.

It will be presented by veteran human rights campaigner Sister Helen Prejean.

**Bush targeted**

Mr Bush is a firm supporter of the death penalty

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Correspondents say the United States is the key target of the campaigners.

Sister Prejean said she hoped that Mr Annan would use his influence to persuade it to rethink.

"He can hold up the United States and say - wouldn't you like to join the good guys? Wouldn't you like to join the global community of countries who stand for human rights?" she said.

But, with US popular support for the death penalty running at about 60% and the emergence of President-elect Bush, the petitioners have a problem.



Sister Helen Prejean will present the petition

More than 660 people have been executed in the US since the death penalty was re-introduced there in 1976.

In Texas, where Mr Bush has been governor for the past four years, support for the death penalty rises to 80%.

Mr Bush has overseen more than 130 executions - a greater number than any other governor in the US since the death penalty was reinstated.

### **Rest of the world**

But worldwide, the number of countries which retain the death penalty is falling.

The European Union prohibits its use in peacetime.

Chief among those that still authorise judicial killings is China which, according to Amnesty International estimates, executed over 1,000 people last year.

Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Democratic Republic of Congo also carry out a large number of executions.

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