

N.J. bans death penalty

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TRENTON, N.J. - Gov. Jon S. Corzine signed into law Monday a measure that abolishes the death penalty, making New Jersey the first state in more than four decades to reject capital punishment.

The bill, approved last week by the state's Assembly and Senate, replaces the death sentence with life in prison without parole.

"This is a day of progress for us and for the millions of people across our nation and around the globe who reject the death penalty as a moral or practical response to the grievous, even heinous, crime of murder," Corzine said.

The measure spares eight men on the state's death row. On Sunday, Corzine signed orders commuting the sentences of those eight to life in prison without parole.

Among the eight spared is Jesse Timmendequas, a sex offender who murdered 7-year-old Megan Kanka in 1994. The case inspired Megan's Law, which requires law enforcement agencies to notify the public about convicted sex offenders living in their communities.

New Jersey reinstated the death penalty in 1982 - six years after the U.S. Supreme Court allowed states to resume executions - but it hasn't executed anyone since 1963.

The state's move is being hailed across the world as a historic victory against capital punishment. Rome plans to shine golden light on the Colosseum in support. Once the arena for deadly gladiator combat and executions, the Colosseum is now a symbol of the fight against the death penalty.

"The rest of America, and for that matter the entire world, is watching what we are doing here today," said Assemblyman Wilfredo Caraballo, a Democrat. "New Jersey is setting a precedent that I'm confident other states will follow."

The bill passed the Legislature largely along party lines, with controlling Democrats supporting the abolition and minority Republicans opposed. Republicans had sought to retain the death penalty for those who murder law enforcement officials, rape and murder children, and terrorists, but Democrats rejected that.

"It's simply a specious argument to say that, somehow, after six millennia of recorded history, the punishment no longer fits the crime," said Assemblyman Joseph Malone, a Republican.

Members of victims' families fought against the law.

Richard Kanka, Megan's father, noted Corzine signed the bill exactly 15 years to the day that death row inmate Ambrose Harris kidnapped, raped and murdered 22-year-old artist Kristin Huggins.

"Just another slap in the face to the victims," Kanka said.