

ABCnews.com, Judge Halts Mississippi Pardons After Uproar, (1.12.12)

As victims' loved ones ask why killers and rapists got pardoned by former Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour during his final hours in office, a Mississippi state judge has temporarily halted the release of 21 of the 200-plus pardoned inmates.

Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood had requested the injunction against the inmates' releases, telling reporters he believes some of Barbour's pardons could have violated the state constitution by failing to give sufficient public notice that the convicts were seeking clemency.

The state constitution requires a public notice about an inmate's intention to seek a pardon be published for 30 days before the governor can grant one.

Five former inmates, four of them convicted of murder and serving life sentences, have already been released. The state's top lawyer is asking the court to serve those former inmates notices underlining that their release may be challenged.

(ABC News)

The news came as families of loved ones killed, raped or robbed by the men and women set free are speaking out against Barbour's actions, saying they wish he had spoken to them first.

"I have a lot of feelings," said Betty Ellis, whose daughter was killed by her estranged husband, David Gatlin, in 1993.

Gatlin received one of the 210 last-minute pardons - nearly twice the number issued since 1988. Some of the pardons were for prisoners assigned to cook and clean at the governor's mansion. Four of those inmates were convicted murderers.

"I've been mad. I can't understand how a man that has children of his own could do this," said Ellis, who marched to the state capital, Jackson, Miss., searching for Barbour.

Barbour, a Republican, released a statement Wednesday evening saying that 189 of the 215 people pardoned were already out of prison.

"My decision about clemency was based upon the recommendation of the parole board in more than 90 percent of the cases," the statement said, according to WTVA-TV.

Thirteen on the 26 inmates released from custody were costly to the state because of medical expenses and can be returned to custody if they commit another crime.

Another three pardoned inmates were listed as receiving a suspended sentence, according to the statement. All 16 are said to still be under the supervision of the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Information on the remaining 10 of the pardoned inmates wasn't included in the statement.

On the same night Ellis' daughter was killed in 1993, Gatlin shot Randy Walker in the head and left him for dead. Walker said Barbour's move has given the state "a black eye."

"This is going to make national news," he said.

He too traveled to Jackson, where he spoke with Gov. Phil Bryant, who'd been sworn in just hours before Barbour had issued the pardons and left office.

Although Bryant told Walker that he would not have pardoned convicted murderers, he said: "The constitution gives the governor that authority and that's his decision to make."

That is little comfort for Walker's wife, Crystal Walker, who told Jackson's Clarion Ledger that both she and her husband now fear for their lives.

"On parole, he'd at least have to check in and have some supervision," she said Sunday. "Now he could live beside us, or we could run into him at Walmart. You're always looking over your shoulder."

Barbour remains a popular leader in the state. He is credited with speeding up the state's recovery from Hurricane Katrina. Barbour maintained that freeing those who worked at the mansion was a Mississippi tradition to show them mercy.

But Mark Mayfield, a lawyer, said the public just didn't get it and neither did he.

"Haley has done a lot of great things," Mayfield said today, "but I'm afraid that in the large measure this will tarnish his image as he goes forward."

ABC News' Enjoli Francis and Sarah Amos, and The Associated Press, contributed to this report.

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