

## International

# US set to execute woman who cut newborn from mother's womb

## Experts still studying the case, seek to prevent it in future

**CHICAGO:** In 2004, Lisa Montgomery strangled a pregnant woman to death and used a kitchen knife to remove the unborn baby from the victim's uterus so she could kidnap the girl. Sixteen years on, the United States is preparing to execute her, and experts are still studying the case so they can understand what prompts such a crime—and how to prevent it in future.

"It's such a horrific act to do and it takes a lot of planning," says Ann Burgess, a professor at Boston College who has studied the rare phenomenon of fetal abduction since the 1990s. John Rabun, a senior consultant on infant abductions to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), says the crime has been more visible in the last 15-20 years.

The organization has documented 21 fetal abductions in the United States since 1964, 18 of them since 2004. That year, Montgomery was 36 years old and the mother of four children. She had undergone a procedure years before that made pregnancy impossible, but those close to her didn't know.

Prosecutors say she carefully identified her victim online—dog breeder Bobbie Jo Stinnett.

Under the guise of buying a puppy, Montgomery went to Stinnett's home, where she strangled her to death, and cut the baby from her body. She left Stinnett dead in a pool of blood. Montgomery crossed state lines with the child

and told her unsuspecting husband, who believed she herself was pregnant, that the baby was hers. In 2007, she was convicted of federal kidnapping resulting in death and handed a death sentence.

The US Justice Department called the crime "especially heinous" in announcing an execution date, which has been pushed back from this month to January 12, 2021. Montgomery's lawyers never contested the facts, but asked that her sentence be commuted to life in prison, saying she had been the victim of repeated violence including rape in her youth. She will be the first woman executed by the federal government in nearly 70 years if the lethal injection goes ahead at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.

### 'They really plan'

Experts say cases like Stinnett's murder—the most recent such incident happened in Texas in October—bear certain similarities. "The person wants a baby, usually to correct or help in a partner relationship that is not doing well," Burgess explains.

Rabun, who has been with the NCMEC since its creation, agrees. "She has a male in her life and that's really the sole reason she steals a baby," he told AFP. His organization also says the women have compulsive, manipulative personalities. Another hallmark of a fetal abduction is the careful preparation.

Burgess notes that many attackers gain weight, organize baby showers for themselves and even set up nurseries in their homes—all to facilitate their false narratives. "They plan to cut a woman open. They really plan. They read medical texts," adds Rabun, saying that assailants are often unaware that the mothers are fatally wounded.

"None of these women seem to get the notion, even after having babies of their own, that if you cut somebody open, they may die." In the 21 cases documented by the NCMEC, 19 mothers have died of their wounds. Meanwhile, the attackers care for the babies as if they were their own. Thirteen of the 21 babies have survived.

### Victims 'vulnerable' at outset

For Elizabeth Petrucelli, a former hospital security director who advises parents on childbirth and bereavement, pregnant women should learn to recognize several key warning signs. In 2015, a post in a Facebook breastfeeding education group set off alarm bells—a woman said her friend was two months late in delivering.

"If she is desperate, she may do the unmentionable," Petrucelli said. She was called an alarmist, but two months later, her fears were borne out—Dynele Lane attacked a pregnant woman, after pretending to be selling her baby clothes. The woman survived, but the baby did



This handout photo provided by the Wyandotte County Sheriff's Department, Lisa Montgomery appears in a booking photo. —AFP

not. Lane was sentenced to 100 years in prison. "Even though the signs were there, you don't want to believe that someone would actually do that," Petrucelli said. "It's one of those things that no one wants to talk about for obvious reasons, but more people need to be aware." — AFP

## Biden names Pete Buttigieg to 'cabinet of firsts'

**WILMINGTON, United States:** Joe Biden boasted of a "cabinet of barrier breakers" Wednesday as the US President-elect introduced his transportation secretary pick Pete Buttigieg, who if confirmed would become the first openly gay head of a cabinet-level department. Buttigieg, whom Biden called "a policy wonk with a big heart," is one of several trailblazing picks by the veteran Democrat who appears to be following through on his pledge to name the most diverse US cabinet ever.

"A cabinet that looks like America" is how Biden, 78, described the inner circle that he is putting together. "We'll have a cabinet of barrier breakers, a cabinet of firsts," he told reporters in Wilmington, Delaware, noting that eight "precedent-busting appointments" were already made.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is among the historic picks, being the first woman and first person of color elected to the post. Others include retired general Lloyd Austin, who would be the first Black secretary of defense, and Janet



WILMINGTON: US President-elect Joe Biden speaks as he announces former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg's nomination to be secretary of transportation while Vice President-elect Kamala Harris watches via video link, during a news conference at Biden's transition headquarters in Wilmington On Wednesday. —AFP

Yellen, the first woman to lead the Treasury Department.

"And today a ninth, the first-ever openly gay nominee to lead a cabinet department (and) one of the youngest cabinet members ever," Biden said. Buttigieg, a former small town Indiana mayor who turns 39 one day before Biden is inaugurated on January 20, was like Harris a rival of Biden's on the 2020 presidential campaign trail. When he

dropped out of the race he quickly endorsed Biden, who at the time compared Buttigieg to his own late son Beau Biden.

The President-elect hailed Buttigieg—who put his mayoral duties on hold to serve as a US Navy intelligence officer in Afghanistan—as a "next-generation leader" who will bring critical problem-solving skills to the challenge of improving the country's ailing infrastructure. — AFP

## US experts meet ahead of Moderna vaccine approval

**WASHINGTON:** US experts met to decide whether to recommend approval of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, potentially paving the way for rollout early next week. The meeting comes after the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine received an emergency use authorization and the first three million doses were distributed in the world's worst-hit country this week.

Today's meeting will be live-streamed to the public, and will end with a vote by the two dozen independent scientists and industry representatives. Should the panelists vote in favor, as is widely expected, the Food and Drug Administration is expected to issue its green light soon after, which could make the US the first country to approve the Moderna vaccine.

The small Massachusetts-based biotech firm teamed up with scientists from the US National Institutes of Health to produce the product, and began work in January just days after Chinese authorities shared the SARS-CoV-2 virus genome. Moderna has received more than \$2.5 billion from the US government for its efforts, and has promised six million doses in the first wave.

A clinical trial of 30,400 people found it was 94.1 percent effective in preventing Covid-19 compared to a placebo, performing slightly better in younger adults compared to the elderly. An FDA review of all available data found there were "no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA (emergency use authorization)." Moncef Slaoui, chief advisor of Operation Warp Speed, told reporters on Wednesday that he was impressed by the level of protection against disease the vaccine provided 10 to 14 days after even the first of two doses. — AFP