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**Elizabeth Sykes, Director
Tim Townsend, Deputy Director**

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FOR INFORMATION CONTACT

Sue Allison (615) 532-6047

Supreme Court Upholds Death Sentence of Michael Rimmer

The Tennessee Supreme Court has unanimously upheld the death sentence jurors imposed on Michael Dale Rimmer for the first degree murder and aggravated robbery of Ricci Ellsworth, a night worker at a Memphis hotel.

Rimmer pleaded guilty to raping Ellsworth in 1989 and, while serving a term in prison, made threats to kill her upon his release in October 1996. In the early morning of February 8, 1997, three months after completing his sentence, Rimmer robbed and murdered Ellsworth at the Memphis Inn. He also stole cash from the register. Although the police found blood at the crime scene, the body of the victim never was recovered.

A month after the murder, Rimmer was arrested in Indiana for driving a stolen car. Police found blood stains in the back seat of the car. DNA testing confirmed the blood matched the victim's and also the blood found at the hotel. Rimmer escaped from Indiana authorities as he was being returned to Tennessee, but was captured after a car chase.

A jury found Rimmer guilty of first degree murder and sentenced him to death. The Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals affirmed his conviction, but remanded for re-sentencing because of irregularities in the jury's verdict. At a second sentencing hearing, a different jury again returned a sentence of death, a judgment upheld by the Court of Criminal Appeals.

In an opinion authored by Justice Gary R. Wade, the Tennessee Supreme Court rejected Rimmer's appeal for a third sentencing hearing and found the evidence sufficient to support the jury's verdict. The court ruled that the sentence was in proportion to previous cases where the death penalty has been imposed in Tennessee.

The court set Rimmer's execution date for April 7, 2009. He has state and federal appeals remaining.