Unfinished business

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

An estimated 5,000 lynchings took place during the Jim Crow and civil rights eras. Most went unsolved, but some of the people responsible for those and other horrific race murders are still alive. There is still time to hold them accountable.

That's the idea behind the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act, which recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives on a 422 to 2 vote but has since stalled in the Senate. The act is named for Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago who was tortured and murdered in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman in a Mississippi grocery store. An all-white jury deliberated a scant 67 minutes before acquitting the two white men charged with the murder. Months later, in an interview with a national magazine, the men, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, admitted killing the boy, whose body had been severely mutilated.

The bill now before Congress would create a "cold case" squad in the Justice Department to pursue unsolved civil rights murders. It is the culmination of work begun two years ago by Jim Talent, then a Republican senator from Missouri, and Sen. Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat.

The legislation provides more than $10 million a year over the next decade for new prosecutors, FBI agents and other resources to investigate unsolved murders that occurred before 1970. State and local law enforcement agencies also would get funding. The Justice Department said it plans to review at least 100 unsolved cases.

Although the clock is ticking - memories are fading, evidence has been lost, and many witnesses and suspects have died - the conviction June 14 of James Ford Seale proves that justice delayed is not always justice denied. Seale, 71, was convicted of kidnapping and conspiracy for the 1964 murders in Mississippi of Charles Moore and Henry Hezekiah Dee, both 19. Mr. Moore and Mr. Dee had been tied to heavy weights and dumped into the Mississippi River while they were still alive.

Others have been brought to justice, too. In 2003, federal prosecutors won a conviction against Ernest Avants, a Mississippi Klansman who murdered a black man in 1966. And plotters who bombed an Alabama church where four young black girls died were convicted 30 years later.

The special investigations unit is long overdue. Successful prosecutions would punish those who, with guns, ropes, bombs, fists and more, killed in the name of white rights. Holding them to account for their heinous crimes not only would right past wrongs but also help heal wounds. It is crucial that those investigations get under way as quickly as possible. Justice demands it.

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