

Defendants: No Remorse For Weapons Plant Break-In

Erik Schelzig, Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — An 83-year-old nun and two other protesters accused of defacing a Tennessee nuclear weapons plant said Wednesday they have no remorse for their actions and were pleased to reach one of the most secure parts of the facility.

Sister Megan Rice, Michael Walli and Greg Boertje-Obed testified on their own behalf during their federal trial on charges related to the July intrusion at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge. The case goes to the jury following closing arguments later Wednesday.

The defendants spent two hours inside the Y-12 National Security Complex. They cut through security fences, hung banners, strung crime-scene tape and hammered off a small chunk of the fortress-like Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility, or HEUMF, inside the most secure part of complex.

Defense attorney Bill Quigley said the judge is waiting until after the verdict to decide whether to dismiss a sabotage charge, the more serious of two charges against the trio. They are also charged with damaging federal property.

Rice said during cross examination that she wished she hadn't waited so long to stage a protest inside the plant.

"My regret was I waited 70 years," she said. "It is manufacturing that which can only cause death."

Rice said she didn't feel obligated to ask the Catholic bishop in the area for permission to act at Y-12. Challenged by a prosecutor about whether it would have been a courtesy to inform superiors of her plans, Rice responded: "I've been guilty of many discourtesies in my life."

Boertje-Obed, a house painter from Duluth, Minn., explained why they sprayed baby bottles full of human blood on the exterior of the facility.

"The reason for the baby bottles was to represent that the blood of children is spilled by these weapons," he said.

All three defendants said they felt guided by divine forces in finding their way through the darkness from the perimeter of the plant to the enriched uranium plant without being detected.

"I believe it was clearly a miracle," Boertje-Obed said. "There is no other way to

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explain it."

Walli, who said he has been homeless in 10 states and has most recently lived in Washington, D.C., agreed.

"It was an answer to prayer," he said.

Prosecutors argue the act was a serious security breach that continues to disrupt operations at the facility. The intrusion caused the plant to shut down for two weeks as security forces were re-trained and contractors were replaced.

Federal officials have said there was never any danger of the protesters reaching materials that could be detonated on site or used to assemble a dirty bomb, a position stressed by defense attorneys.

The plant that has had a hand in making, maintaining or dismantling parts of every nuclear weapon in the country's arsenal.

The protesters' attorneys noted that once they refused to plead guilty to trespassing, prosecutors substituted that charge with the sabotage count that increased the maximum prison term from one year to 20 years. The other charge of damaging federal property carries a maximum sentence of 10 years.

The protesters call themselves "Transform Now Plowshares," a reference to the biblical phrase: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks."

Their actions were lauded by some members of Congress, who said the incursion called attention to flawed security at Y-12, first built as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II that provided enriched uranium for the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

The plant makes uranium parts for nuclear warheads, dismantles old weapons and is the nation's primary storehouse for bomb-grade uranium. The facility enjoys high levels of support in the region, and Oak Ridge has always taken pride in its role in building the atomic bomb, viewing it as crucial to the end of the war.

A report by the Department of Energy's inspector general said Y-12 security failures included broken detection equipment, poor response from security guards and insufficient federal oversight of private contractors running the complex.

For decades, protesters have rallied at the gates of Y-12 around the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. Some deliberately trespass or block traffic to provoke arrest and call more attention to their cause. Some years, authorities have tried to deprive them of the notoriety by refusing to prosecute. In previous prosecutions, the stiffest sentence ever meted out was less than a year in prison.

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