

upi-fugitive

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Wash. fugitive charged with arson, murder

By STUART GLASCOCK

SEATTLE, March 8 (UPI) – An arson-murder suspect who fled to Brazil a year ago to avoid prosecution for a fire that killed four firefighters was arraigned Friday on four counts of first-degree murder and one count of arson.

Suspect Martin Pang's attorney objected to the four murder charges, arguing they were not allowed under the extradition agreement with Brazil.

"We do object to arraignment on any charge other than arson," Pang's attorney John Henry Browne told Presiding Judge Brian Gain. "The state's memorandum filed today seems to acknowledge that there is no authority to charge Mr. Pang with the first four counts at this point."

Browne entered a plea of innocent to the arson charges, and refused to respond to the other counts. For the record, Gain added innocent pleas on the murder charges, then assigned the case to a trial judge.

Pang, 40, is accused of torching the family's Mary Pang Food warehouse in downtown Seattle Jan. 5, 1995, allegedly to share in the insurance money.

Pang sat silent at the brief arraignment. He was wearing a King County Jail jumpsuit designating him a high security inmate. He looked stern-faced and showed no emotion.

About two dozen firefighters and their family members packed the courtroom to catch their first glimpse of Pang. Some, including Seattle Fire Department Deputy Chief Don Taylor, clutched photographs of the fire victims.

Taylor said he and the families were pleased to hear the charges. Prosecutors had been wrangling with how to charge Pang for months.

Arson deaths in Brazil are not considered murders if the fire was not intended to kill, and the Brazilian Supreme Court has ruled that Pang could be turned over only to face arson charges. King county authorities have asked the Brazilian high court to reconsider and are awaiting a ruling.

"The trial is not in limbo," said King County Prosecutor Norm Maleng. "Martin Pang has been formally arraigned. The case has been assigned to (King County Superior Court) Judge Larry Jordan. The next step is to bring motions before Judge Jordan," Maleng said.

Charging Pang with four counts of murder "preserves our options," Maleng told reporters.

"Rather than amend the charges at a later time, the cleanest way to begin was to arraign him on the whole case and get this case before Judge Jordan," Maleng said.

Browne strongly objected to Maleng's legal strategy, calling in "form over substance."

"This court has no jurisdiction for Martin for murder," Browne said. "They have arraigned him even though they acknowledge they cannot try him for murder."

Browne said he would file a formal objection to the murder charges and appeal to the federal courts if necessary.

First-degree arson carries a standard sentence of 24-to-27 months, while first-degree murder would mean life in prison. The death penalty would not apply because Pang apparently did not intend to kill anyone.

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