



U.S. Department of Justice

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THREE OGLE COUNTY RESIDENTS PLEAD GUILTY TO CHARGES ARISING FROM FEDERAL ARSON CHARGE

ROCKFORD -- PATRICK J. FITZGERALD, United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois; ANDREW L. TRAVER, Special Agent-In-Charge of the Chicago Office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, & Explosives; DAVID B. FOREMAN, Illinois State Fire Marshal; and DARIN DEHAAN, Chief of the Oregon Police Department, today made the following announcement:

MATTHEW R. McMEEKAN, age 20, of Oregon, Illinois, pleaded guilty in federal court today to conspiring to commit arson in that he conspired with other individuals to burn down the Oregon Smoke Shop, located at 210 S. 4th Street, Oregon, Illinois, on October 4, 2007. Two other men charged in the case have also pled guilty. On June 19, 2008, **CHRISTOPHER R. TAYLOR**, age 19, of Mt. Morris, Illinois, pleaded guilty to conspiring to commit arson, and **HAROLD LAMAR RAINS**, age 19 of Oregon, Illinois, pleaded guilty to perjury relating to his false testimony before the Federal Grand Jury during the investigation of the fire.

A fourth co-defendant, **SAMER S. ALJABARI**, age 22, of Oregon, Illinois, has also been charged in the case with one count of destroying, by means of fire, a building used in interstate commerce (arson), and one count of conspiracy to commit arson.

In pleading guilty, McMeekan and Taylor admitted that beginning in July 2007 and continuing to October 4, 2007, they conspired with others to burn down the Oregon Smoke Shop, a retail business that sold tobacco and tobacco-related products which had previously been transported in interstate commerce. Specifically, McMeekan admitted that Aljabari recruited him to burn down the Oregon Smoke Shop because it was hurting the business of Sam's Wholesale Tobacco and Gifts (Sam's Wholesale), another smoke shop in Oregon where Aljabari worked and which was owned by a relative of Aljabari. McMeekan further admitted that in the late evening on October 3, 2007, McMeekan went to the Oregon Smoke Shop and broke the front window of the business with a baseball bat, and then returned to Sam's Wholesale to listen to a police scanner with Aljabari to see if any alarm had been issued. When McMeekan and Aljabari did not hear an alarm issued, McMeekan contacted Taylor who agreed to help with the fire. McMeekan and Taylor admitted that they met with Aljabari who said he would pay McMeekan and Taylor \$1,000 each to burn down the Oregon Smoke Shop.

McMeekan and Taylor admitted that in the early morning of October 4, 2008, McMeekan drove Taylor to the area near Rains' residence in Oregon and Taylor spoke to Rains. Rains agreed to create a diversion by calling police to falsely report a suspicious person near his residence.

According to their plea agreements, Aljabari gave McMeekan and Taylor a plastic gas can filled with kerosene and blue surgical masks to wear when they started the fire. After making the false report, Rains sent McMeekan a text message saying "go". McMeekan, who had obtained a 2 gallon plastic gas can containing gasoline from his father's garage, then drove with Taylor to a parking lot approximately one block away from the Oregon Smoke Shop where they parked the car. Taylor and McMeekan each carried a gas can to the Oregon Smoke Shop. Taylor went through the broken window, and McMeekan handed the gas cans to Taylor through the window. Taylor then poured the gas and kerosene throughout the shop, lit the flammable liquid and a fire erupted. Taylor jumped out the window and the two men ran back to McMeekan's car and drove back to Sam's Wholesale to meet with Aljabari. Aljabari kept the two plastic gas cans and McMeekan and Taylor gave Aljabari their shoes, hooded sweat shirts and blue surgical face masks that they wore when they started the fire. Aljabari gave each of them a different pair of shoes and sweatshirts. After changing their clothes, McMeekan drove Taylor to his house. The fire caused more than \$38,000 in damage to the Oregon Smoke Shop.

In pleading guilty to perjury, Rains admitted that during the federal Grand Jury investigation of the fire he knowingly falsely testified about his knowledge and involvement in burning down the Oregon Smoke Shop. Specifically, Rains admitted that he falsely testified that he did not recognize the individual outside his residence on October 4, 2007, when in fact, he knew that individual to be Taylor. Rains further admitted in his plea agreement that when Rains testified that he did not have any conversations about burning down the smoke shop, he knew that statement was false because he had discussed burning down the Oregon Smoke Shop with Aljabari and McMeekan on several occasions prior to October 4, 2007.

Sentencing for McMeekan is scheduled for October 6, 2008, at 2:30 p.m. Sentencing for Rains will be conducted on October 2, 2008, at 10:30 a.m., and for Taylor on October 2, 2008, at 2:30 p.m. Both McMeekan and Taylor face a minimum sentence of 5 years and a maximum potential sentence of 20 years in prison. Rains faces a possible maximum penalty of 5 years in prison. Each defendant also faces a fine of up to \$250,000, up to 3 years of supervised release following imprisonment, and full restitution. The actual sentence for each defendant will be determined by the United States District Court, guided by the United States Sentencing Guidelines.

With regard to Aljabari, members of the public are reminded that an indictment is only a charge and is not evidence of guilt. Aljabari is entitled to a fair trial at which time the government has the burden of proving his guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

The case was investigated by the Rockford office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and the Oregon Police Department, with the assistance of the Oregon Fire Department. The case is being prosecuted in federal court by Assistant United States Attorney Joseph C. Pedersen.

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