

International

Prosecutor explains death of hijack victim

ROME (AP) — Leon Klinghoffer may have been killed by the Achille Lauro hijackers because he tried to defend himself after he was pushed and insulted, a prosecutor was quoted Sunday as saying.

The body of the 69-year-old, partly paralyzed New Yorker was flown Sunday to New York from Rome, where an autopsy indicated he was killed by gunfire.

The Rome daily La Repubblica quoted Genoa Deputy Prosecutor Luigi Carli as saying that investigators had learned from three witnesses that Klinghoffer had "reacted" to shoves and gibes by one of the four hijackers.

One hijacker then slugged Klinghoffer in the stomach and another shot him with a Kalashnikov submachine gun, Carli said.

Calls to Carli's office in an attempt to confirm the reports went unanswered Sunday.

La Repubblica also said that Klinghoffer had been separated from the other hostages aboard the luxury liner because the four pirates had considered the wheelchair-bound man an "obstacle."

Another Rome newspaper, Il Messaggero, quoted unnamed judicial sources as saying that Klinghoffer had actually struck one of the hijackers when his watch was ripped from his wrist.

Angered, the hijacker called for Klinghoffer's execution, Il Messaggero said. The paper did not say which pirate made the demand.

Both newspapers reported that Klinghoffer's wife, Marilyn, knew definitely of his death only as the hijackers were leaving the ship after their surrender Oct. 9.

The pirates, who claim to belong to a faction of the Palestine Liberation Front, terrorized more than 500 people for 51 hours aboard the Achille Lauro.

On Sunday, U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Rabb stood by quietly as the American flag-draped coffin carrying Klinghoffer's body was brought to a Pan Am 747 waiting at Rome's Leonardo Da Vinci airport to take it to New York, where it was met by members of the Klinghoffer family and government officials.

The pirates were questioned at length Saturday in the maximum security prison in Spoleto, in central Italy, where they are in custody, the Italian news agency ANSA said.

Prosecutors in Genoa, claiming a right to jurisdiction in the case because the ship left from Genoa on Oct. 3, have asked those in Siracusa, Sicily, to hand over to them results of their investigation.

Judicial authorities in Siracusa have been conducting their own investigation because the four hijackers were brought to Sicily in an Egyptian plane forced down there by U.S. warplanes Oct. 11.

The Court of Cassation, Italy's highest court dealing with criminal matters, was expected to be called upon to resolve the question of jurisdiction.

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