

Former Black Panther leader will fight extradition on murder charge

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Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, the former H. Rap Brown, said he will fight extradition to Georgia, where he faces a murder charge in the death of a sheriff's deputy in Atlanta on March 16. The former leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party was picked up in Lowndes County, Alabama on March 21, after five days on the run from the authorities, whom he accuses of mounting a government conspiracy against him.

Al-Amin, now 56 years old, was arrested several times in the 1960s and 70s. He served five years in prison on an armed robbery charge, converting to Islam upon his release, moving to Atlanta in 1976 and living away from the limelight for most of the past quarter-century. He operated a small grocery store and was the spiritual leader of a mosque in the West End neighborhood of the city.

The former black radical is accused of fatally shooting deputy Ricky Kinchen and wounding sheriff's deputy Aldranon English as they tried to serve an arrest warrant on him at the grocery store. The warrant was issued after Al-Amin failed to appear in court in January on charges of receiving stolen property and impersonating a police officer. The charges stem from an incident last May, when he was allegedly stopped in a stolen car. English, who was shot but not seriously hurt in last week's incident, identified the shooter as Al-Amin.

The defendant was handcuffed and shackled at a hearing in the federal courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama after his arrest. US Attorney Redding Pitt asked that federal charges of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution be dropped. Pitt explained that "the responsibility of the United States government ... is to assist the state of Georgia in bringing an accused person before the bar of justice." The dropping of

federal charges is necessary for the extradition process to begin.

The accused man's lawyer, Selma, Alabama civil rights attorney J.L. Chestnut, told the press that Al-Amin was innocent. "He said he did not shoot anyone," Chestnut said. "He said he did not have a gun. He fled Atlanta to save his life. He said they had been trying to kill him for years. He said it was a real conspiracy. He's been fighting the system since he was 16 years old, and the system has been trying to kill him." Chestnut said his client had been "lucky to get out of Atlanta with his life."

There are abundant grounds for skepticism on the latest charges facing Al-Amin, and many indications that he has been the target of a vendetta by the authorities. In 1995 he was accused of aggravated assault in Atlanta after a man claimed Al-Amin shot him. The man later recanted the charge and said he had been pressured by officials to make the accusation.

There are many unanswered questions about the current charges. Deputy English has insisted that he fired at Al-Amin during the Atlanta incident, hitting him in the middle of his body, and the police found a trail of blood leading from the site of the shooting to a nearby vacant building. Paramedics who examined Al-Amin after he was picked up in Alabama, however, said he had no injuries. He was wearing a bulletproof vest, but investigators said it was an old model that would not have deflected the shot that English claimed to have hit him with.

Another former Black Panther leader, Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, was only recently freed from prison after a court found that he had not received a fair trial on charges of murdering a teacher in 1968. Pratt had been sentenced to 25 years to life and had spent decades in jail.

Leaders of several US Muslim organizations said they would ask for a Justice Department investigation into the case. “We are not here today to judge the guilt or innocence of any party to this tragic series of events,” said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “We want to ensure that Imam Jamil receives proper legal representation.” The Council, along with several other Islamic groups, said it would start a legal defense fund for Al-Amin.

The accused man was found hiding in a shed on Monday afternoon in the town of White Hall, Alabama, about 160 miles from Atlanta. Al-Amin had apparently fled to Lowndes County to turn for help from people he had worked with in the early days of the civil rights movement. Lowndes County is a landmark of the civil rights struggle. A poverty-stricken area where 85 percent of the population in the 1960s was black but there was not one black registered voter, it was the focus of a SNCC voting rights campaign which drew worldwide attention.

The student volunteers knocked on doors and tried to persuade frightened black sharecroppers to register to vote. “It was slow work, and it took courage for those people to register,” said John Hulett, an organizer who worked with Al-Amin and is now a probate judge in Lowndes. “Those were the days of poll taxes and literacy tests, and people would just turn up shot to death.”

The current mayor of White Hall, John Jackson, said he had known Al-Amin since the 1960s. Jackson said that H. Rap Brown had persuaded many to register. “And lately when I’ve talked to him, he always seemed calm, never violent. It’s just hard to believe.”



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