

N.Y. judge sentences terrorism defendant to life

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NEW YORK (AP) — A former personal secretary to Osama bin Laden got a strong rebuke from a judge Tuesday as he was sentenced to life in prison for a second time after claiming the Sept. 11 attacks and Superstorm Sandy were "God's punishment" for injustice against himself and others by the United States.

"You sir, in my judgment, are a committed terrorist who has betrayed his country," U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan told Wadih El-Hage after listening to the claims of the Lebanese-born man who became a U.S. citizen.

El-Hage said he was treated unjustly before his 2001 conviction in the August 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa. The attacks killed 224 people, including a dozen Americans.

The judge said a life sentence was necessary in part because El-Hage, 52, was "quite likely to engage in or further terrorist activities against this country in this district until your last breath, if you were ever released." He also re-imposed a \$33.8 million restitution order, saying \$7 million would go to the families of victims and the rest to the U.S. government.

El-Hage was convicted in 2001 of conspiracy and other charges and was sentenced to life in prison. A federal appeals court in Manhattan ordered a resentencing after El-Hage argued that the federal sentencing guidelines he was sentenced under were no longer mandatory.

El-Hage, who has a long beard, was brought into court handcuffed with numerous court officers providing tight security. At a hearing prior to trial, El-Hage had leaped out of a jury box where he was held with three other defendants and charged toward a door located about 15 feet (4.5 meters) from the judge before he was tackled against a wall by U.S. marshals.

Prior to the announcement of his sentence, El-Hage spoke for more than a half hour, saying he was "unfairly and unjustly convicted" and that he had "nothing to do with any of those conspiracies."

Wiping tears from his eyes as he described how criminal charges accused him of killing innocent civilians, El-Hage claimed that no jury could have remained unbiased in light of the accusations and that his chance to redeem himself was spoiled when his defense lawyers "fiercely resisted" his desire to testify at trial.

"And I had a lot to say," El-Hage said.

He claimed he had followed U.S. laws since coming to the country in 1978 as a teenager and had registered as required at U.S. embassies as he traveled through Sudan, Pakistan and Kenya. At the time of his arrest, he was living in Arlington, Texas, with his wife and seven children.

He cited the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks and Superstorm Sandy, saying "This is God's punishment for clear injustice."

At his first sentencing just weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, El-Hage condemned the attacks, saying the "killing of innocent people is radical, extreme and cannot be tolerated by any religion, principles or values."

El-Hage's rambling statement Tuesday led him to concede at one point that some might find "what I say strange or unusual" and Kaplan's patience wore thin as the judge finally warned El-Hage to complete his comments in five minutes. When it was no longer his turn, El-Hage tried to speak several more times and the judge shouted him down, saying "Quiet!"

Though El-Hage was in the United States when nearly simultaneous bombings were carried out on U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the government said he played a leadership role prior to the attacks.

In a legal brief, prosecutors said El-Hage was one of the leaders of al-Qaida's East Africa cell, providing false documents so operatives could travel between Africa and Afghanistan to meet with al-Qaida leaders. They said El-Hage carried a specific directive at one point from al-Qaida's military command to militarize the East African cell and was a high-ranking and trusted associate of bin Laden who performed essential tasks, including disbursing the al-Qaida payroll and operating al-Qaida businesses that provided cover for its terrorist activities.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Sean Buckley told Kaplan that El-Hage was a "terrible candidate for your honor's mercy," saying he could have prevented the bombings if he had not lied to U.S. law enforcement authorities about al-Qaida operatives in Africa when he returned to the United States in September 1997.

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