

Florida to Seek Death for 4 in Murder of Couple

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AP/The Pensacola News Journal

File: Byrd and Melanie Billings with their children, 10 adopted and two biological, are seen at their home in Beulah, Fla.

PENSACOLA, Fla. — Prosecutors said Monday they will seek the death penalty for four of eight people charged in the killings of a Panhandle couple known for adopting children with autism, Down syndrome and other special needs.

In a brief statement, State Attorney Bill Eddins said he had filed notices to seek death for the accused ring leader, 35-year-old Leonard Patrick Gonzalez Jr., as well as 28-year-old Donnie Ray Stallworth; 41-year-old Wayne Thomas Coldiron, and 19-year-old Frederick Lee Thornton Jr.

All four have pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder, along with two other men and a 16-year-old boy. A woman has pleaded not guilty to accessory to first-degree murder.

Cheryl Alverson, an attorney for Thornton, said she heard the news late Monday and hadn't had a chance to talk with her client.

"We are not happy about it," she said. "Anytime there is an issue like this, you have to prepare for the worst."

Alverson, who was appointed by the state, said she would likely withdraw from the case because she was not qualified to defend a death penalty case.

Gonzalez Jr. is without an attorney because of a previous conflict of interest issue and because his former attorney was not qualified to handle death penalty cases, the public defender's office said.

David White represents Stallworth, an Air Force staff sergeant from nearby Hurlburt Field. White learned prosecutors would seek the death penalty after being contacted by The Associated Press.

"In any murder case, we cautiously and prudently prepare as if it will be a death penalty case unless the state attorney notifies us otherwise," said White, who added that he didn't want to say anything else until he spoke with his client.

An attorney for Coldiron did not immediately return phone messages.

The men are accused of shooting and killing Byrd and Melanie Billings in a brutal July home invasion at their sprawling home west of Pensacola. Nine of their adopted children, all between 4 and 11 years old, were home at the time and some of the children watched and listened as the couple fought with the masked intruders and were gunned down.

One of the children later ran for help.

Taken from the home was a safe investigators have said contained the children's medications, family documents and jewelry of sentimental value to the family. A family attorney has said a second safe left at the home contained \$164,000 in cash and may have been the intended target.

Surveillance cameras captured men dressed as ninjas and wearing black masks entering the home house and leaving in less than four minutes.