NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Activists who broke into security complex found guilty, face 30 years in prison

Patrick O'Neill | May. 9, 2013
Knoxville, Tenn.

An 83-year-old nun who told a federal jury she was led by the Holy Spirit to "transform" the largest stockpile of weapons-grade uranium in the world and her two co-defendants were found guilty Wednesday of destruction of government property and sabotage stemming from their July 2012 protest at the Y-12 National Security Complex in nearby Oak Ridge.

Sr. Megan Rice, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Michael Walli and Greg Boertje-Obed face up to 30 years in prison, but sentencing guidelines will likely keep the defendants' actual prison time at less than five years. The jury deliberated for about two and half hours before announcing its verdict.

Despite testimony that referred to the group's actions as vandalism, the jury found the three guilty of the most serious charge of intentionally and willfully harming "the national defense of the United States."

The three had been free without bond before the trial, but U.S. District Judge Amul Thapar ordered them into custody in a county jail until their Sept. 23 sentencing.

Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge is the nation's only facility for manufacturing, processing and storing weapons-grade uranium.

On July 28, 2012, the trio, armed with bolt cutters, snipped holes in four Y-12 fences and by-passed security cameras, sensors, guard dogs and a roaming security patrol to access what is referred to the as the "Fort Knox of Uranium," a place many considered the most secure nuclear weapons facility in the world.

Once past the fences, the three spray-painted what a defense lawyer called "biblical graffiti" on the outside of the building known as the Highly Enriched Uranium Materials Facility, hammered on the structure, wrapped it in crime-scene tape and sang hymns.

The action, which the three called the Transform Now Plowshares, garnered international media attention.

As a result of the security breach, the Y-12 facility was shut down for 15 days and officials were subject to congressional scrutiny. In the aftermath of the security breach, one of the private companies charged with keeping Y-12 secure lost its contract.

Video footage from surveillance cameras that showed a security officer confronting the activists was shown to jurors during the three-day trial.

In the video, Rice bows to Y-12 security officer Kirk Garland in what she called a Buddhist greeting while Walli, 63, and Boertje-Obed, 57, hold lit candles. Garland, the only Y-12 employee fired as a result of the incident, gets out of his vehicle and makes a phone call for backup.

In his testimony, Garland said he encountered peace protesters in his previous security job at Rocky Flats, Colo., another Department of Energy nuclear weapons facility, and knew he did not need to draw his weapon.

"I knew what I had," he said during the trial. "They told me they were sent by God, and they wanted to read to me from a statement and read from the Bible, from Isaiah."

Minutes later, the surveillance footage shows the arrival of a second officer, who orders the activists to lie face-down on the ground.

All three defendants testified during the trial, telling jurors that their actions were designed to be "transformative" rather than destructive and that Y-12's nuclear weapons production constituted the only crime committed.

Following the verdict, longtime Plowshares activist Oblate Fr. Carl Kabat, who drove to the trial from St. Louis, said, "Unfortunately, we won. Nonviolent public resistance, you can't lose."

A sister from Rice's community who was at the trial said her superiors asked individual sisters not to comment on the verdict to media outlets.

Michele Naar-Obed, Boertje-Obed's wife, said she expected the verdict but said she was disappointed the jurors didn't "go deep and grapple" with the evidence, which included testimony about nuclear weapons and nuclear war as well as what she called the U.S. government's failure to honor international treaties.

"They didn't dig down and struggle with this," she said.

[Patrick O'Neill, a freelance writer from Raleigh, N.C., is a longtime contributor to *NCR*.]

Source URL (retrieved on *09/18/2014 - 04:16*): http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/activists-who-broke-security-complex-found-guilty-face-30-years-jail