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Trial begins for four accused of bombing U.S. embassies

NEW YORK (AP) — His hair and beard are wild and woolly, his eyes dark and hollow, his frame bony. Though 40, he claims he's a college freshman living in the 1970s and can't remember his wife and children. He managed a tire shop in Texas suburbia but has trotted the globe, with stops in Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Meet Wadhi El-Hage — U.S. citizen and one of four men going on trial Monday in the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

Prosecutors say El-Hage was a personal secretary to wealthy Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, the alleged engineer of the attacks that killed 224 people, including 12 Americans, in Kenya and Tanzania. If convicted, he could face life in prison.

Besides El-Hage, the other defendants include Mohamed Sadeek Odeh, 35, of Jordan who allegedly told investigators that shortly before the bombing he had met with an explosives expert who led a Kenyan terrorism cell. He also faces a potential life sentence if convicted.

Two others — Mohamed Rashed Daoud Al-Owhali, 24, of Saudi Arabia and Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, 27, of Tanzania — could be sentenced to death.

All the defendants have been portrayed as militants willing to go to any extreme to carry out bin Laden's holy war, or jihad, against the "enemies of God."

But El-Hage stands apart.

For one, he is the only U.S. citizen among the defendants. Former co-workers and neighbors in Arlington, Texas, described him as a hard-working family man.

He also has distinguished himself since his 1998 arrest by complaining loudly and constantly that he is an innocent victim of guilt-by-association, jailhouse abuse and, most recently, mental illness and amnesia. Frustrated by conditions in a federal lock-up, he jumped up in court last summer and dashed at U.S. District Judge Leonard Sand before being tackled by federal marshals.

Sand ordered El-Hage to undergo psychological examinations after defense attorneys told him that more than two years of solitary confinement and strip searches had left their client too distressed and disoriented to aid in his own defense.

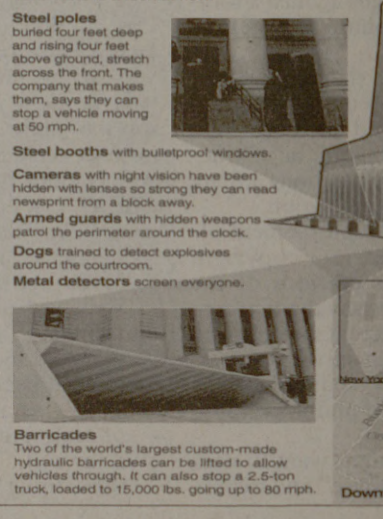
To back up claims he had no memory of his life past his first year in college, they

produced a copy of a rambling handwritten letter in which El-Hage told his wife he didn't know her name, asked if she was "part of the game" that is being played on me and other foreign students. ... I was kidnapped from my school and brought here against my will."

But prosecutors portray El-Hage as a calculating malingering who used U.S. citizenship only made him more dangerous.

Building a federal fortress

Bracing itself for the trial of the United States vs. Osama bin Laden for charges connected to the bombing of two American embassies in Africa, security has been tightened in and around the U.S. Federal Courthouse in downtown New York. Here is a look at how.



President meets with Democrats

Bush takes questions from lawmakers about tax cuts, abortion

FARMINGTON, Pa. (AP) — President Bush said he got a cordial hearing from skeptical Democratic lawmakers Sunday, but will have to wait to gauge his success in winning any of them over to his proposals for tax cuts and other matters on his agenda.



BUSH

"I think they listened," Bush said as he left the two-hour session, which had been scheduled to last just over an hour. "I have no idea until the votes come. They were very cordial. These are professionals who want to serve their nation."

Bush spokesman Scott McClellan said the president spoke for about eight minutes and spent the rest of the time responding to questions. The meeting was closed to the press. Approximately 300 people attended, about half of them Democratic House members.

"Hopefully we can exceed expectations," Bush told the Democrats, according to the spokesman. "The expectation is, because of the closeness of the election, nothing will get done."

He said much of Bush's remarks focused on improving civility in Washington.

"I hope people can disagree in an agreeable way," he quoted the president as saying. "Bipartisanship is going to require more than words to put forth good public policy."

Bush added that he believes "the right thing to do is to do what you said you were going to do," according to McClellan.

Echoing previous remarks to lawmakers, the spokesman said Bush told them he was concerned about national debt but also about consumer debt, which he said tax cuts could help alleviate.

He said the Democrats questioned Bush on a wide range of issues, including his tax plan, abortion and election reform.

Bush made no firm promises on election reform but said "we ought to do something about it," he quoted the president as saying.

McClellan characterized the tone of the questioning as "respectful" and said "there was a commitment on both sides to work together."

The centerpiece of the Bush agenda is his proposed 10-year, \$1.6 trillion tax cut, which he plans to submit to Congress on Thursday.

"I'm feeling good," Bush said as he and chief of staff Andrew Card strode into the Democratic gathering at the snow-covered Nemaacolin Woodlands Resort and Spa about 60 miles south of Pittsburgh. Also at Bush's side was his brother-in-law, Bobby Koch.

Bush said he was delivering a message to Democrats "about having a civil tone of discourse, (and) about an agenda" that includes tax cuts, Social Security and Medicare reform and improving schools.

"And I'm going to answer some questions. And then I'm going to head on home and take a nap," he said with a smile.

The president planned to devote much of his energy this week to building public support for the tax reduction. On Monday, he was bringing to the White House his families who would benefit from his proposed tax reductions because they would fall into lower tax brackets.

He has moved aggressively to win over lawmakers, especially the Democrats who are suspicious of his proposals.

Bush says the tax cut is necessary to stave off a recession, and many Democrats agree, though some believe a smaller cut of less than \$1 trillion over 10 years is in order.

News in Brief

Marine Corps jet crashes, two dead

CHERRY POINT, N.C. (AP) — A Marine Corps Harrier jet crashed Saturday as it neared touchdown on a base runway. The two crew members were killed, a spokesman said.

The jump-jet crashed while approaching the runway about 4

p.m., said 1st Lt. John Caldwell, spokesman at Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station. The jump-jet design allows the Harrier to take off and land vertically; it redirects its thrust to fly.

The Cherry Point station is home to one Harrier training squadron and three squadrons that are deployed on missions accompanying Marines from nearby Camp Lejeune.

In 1999 and 2000, the Marines temporarily grounded their Harrier jets, as well as other aircraft, due to safety concerns.

During the 2000 budget year, 30 deaths resulted from Marine aviation accidents, including an MV-22 Osprey crash in Arizona in April that killed 19 Marines and the crash of a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter off the coast of San Diego in December 1999.

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