

Rare robbery case brings cries of racism

By JULIANA BARBASSA, Associated Press Writer 47 minutes ago

Three young black men break into a white man's home in rural Northern California. The homeowner shoots two of them to death — but it's the surviving black man who is charged with murder.

In a case that has brought cries of racism from civil rights groups, Renato Hughes Jr., 22, was charged by prosecutors in this overwhelmingly white county under a rarely invoked legal doctrine that could make him responsible for the bloodshed.

"It was pandemonium" inside the house that night, District Attorney Jon Hopkins said. Hughes was responsible for "setting the whole thing in motion by his actions and the actions of his accomplices."

Prosecutors said homeowner Shannon Edmonds opened fire Dec. 7 after three young men rampaged through the Clearlake house demanding marijuana and brutally beat his stepson. Rashad Williams, 21, and Christian Foster, 22, were shot in the back. Hughes fled.

Hughes was charged with first-degree murder under California's Provocative Act doctrine, versions of which have been on the books in many states for generations but are rarely used.

The Provocative Act doctrine does not require prosecutors to prove the accused intended to kill. Instead, "they have to show that it was reasonably foreseeable that the criminal enterprise could trigger a fatal response from the homeowner," said Brian Getz, a San Francisco defense attorney unconnected to the case.

The NAACP complained that prosecutors came down too hard on Hughes, who also faces robbery, burglary and assault charges. Prosecutors are not seeking the death penalty.

The Rev. Amos Brown, head of the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP and pastor at Hughes' church, said the case demonstrates the legal system is racist in remote Lake County, aspiring wine country 100 miles north of San Francisco. The sparsely populated county of 13,000 people is 91 percent white and 2 percent black.

Brown and other NAACP officials are asking why the homeowner is walking free. Tests showed Edmonds had marijuana and prescription medication in his system the night of the shooting. Edmonds had a prescription for both the pot and the medication to treat depression.

"This man had no business killing these boys," Brown said. "They were shot in the back. They had fled."

On Thursday, a judge granted a defense motion for a change of venue. The defense had argued that he would not be able to get a fair trial because of extensive local media coverage and the unlikelihood that Hughes could get a jury of his peers in the county. A new location for the trial will be selected Dec. 14.

The district attorney said that race played no part in the charges against Hughes and that the homeowner was spared prosecution because of evidence he was defending himself and his family, who were asleep when the assailants barged in at 4 a.m.

Edmonds' stepson, Dale Lafferty, suffered brain damage from the baseball bat beating he took during the melee. The 19-year-old lives in a rehabilitation center and can no longer feed himself.

"I didn't do anything wrong. All I did was defend my family and my children's lives," said Edmonds, 33. "I'm sad the kids are dead, I didn't mean to kill them."

He added: "Race has nothing to do with it other than this was a gang of black people who thought they were going to beat up this white family."

California's Provocative Act doctrine has primarily been used to charge people whose actions led to shooting deaths.

However, in one notable case in Southern California in 1999, a man who robbed a family at gunpoint in their home was convicted of murder because a police officer pursuing him in a car chase slammed into another driver in an intersection, killing her.

Hughes' mother, San Francisco schoolteacher Judy Hughes, said she believes the group didn't intend to rob the family, just buy marijuana. She called the case against her son a "legal lynching."

"Only God knows what happened in that house," she said. "But this I know: My son did not murder his childhood friends."