

U.S. NEWS

ISIS Hostage-Taking Trial Opens

By ARUNA VISWANATHA

ALEXANDRIA, Va.—More than seven years after humanitarian aid worker Kayla Mueller and others were taken hostage by Islamic State extremists in Syria and killed, one of their alleged tormentors is facing a federal jury in Virginia on charges that carry a life sentence.

El Shafee Elsheikh, who was born in Sudan in 1988 and grew up in London, allegedly supervised detention facilities for the terrorist group and was a member of a cell that murdered U.S. citizens including journalist James Foley and Ms. Mueller in Syria in 2014 and early 2015.

Prosecutors say he was one of the notoriously cruel guards who spoke with British accents and were facetiously referred to by the hostages as “the Beatles.”

“This is a case about the captivity in Syria of four American citizens, about their brutal mistreatment in captivity, and their deaths,” Assistant U.S. Attorney John Gibbs told jurors on Wednesday as he introduced the case. He warned them they would hear awful testimony from released hostages and others over the course of a potentially four-week trial.

They would describe, Mr. Gibbs said, how a group of prison guards with British accents were among the most barbaric terrorists they encountered, covering their faces and beating prisoners who looked at them. The British guards appeared to take pleasure in their torture, including waterboarding one and giving another whose 25th birthday came in captivity 25 blows for the occasion. Some of the hostages referred to Mr. Elsheikh

as Ringo, Mr. Gibbs said.

A lawyer for Mr. Elsheikh, Edward MacMahon, said while what happened to the hostages was “heartbreaking and horrific,” the evidence wouldn’t prove that Mr. Elsheikh was part of the group.

Mr. MacMahon said Mr. Elsheikh, who sat with his lawyers dressed in a blue dress shirt, glasses, and a black face mask, had been involved with Islamic State activities but wasn’t involved in the hostage taking, suggesting that his identity may have been confused with one of several other British members of Islamic State who all had similar backgrounds.

While several Western members of the terrorist group have been prosecuted in the U.S., Mr. Elsheikh is one of the most notorious to face a U.S. courtroom and faces more serious charges, terrorism experts said.

“Nobody at this level of prominence in ISIS has gone to trial in the U.S. before,” said Greg Gonzalez, a former counterterrorism prosecutor who worked on several Islamic State-related investigations and is now in private practice.

Mr. Elsheikh and another member of the cell, Alexandra Kotey, were captured by Kurdish fighters in Syria in 2018 and were in U.S. military custody in Iraq until 2020, when they were brought to the U.S. to face the charges.

The Justice Department agreed not to pursue the death penalty against them, paving the way for the British government to provide evidence for their prosecution in the U.S., on an eight-count indictment that charged them with hostage-taking resulting in death, conspiring to murder Americans outside the U.S., and conspiring to provide material

support to terrorists.

Kotey pleaded guilty to all counts last year, admitting he worked with Mr. Elsheikh and others to take Ms. Mueller hostage, along with Mr. Foley, journalist Steven Sotloff and aid worker Peter Kassig, who were all beheaded in gruesome propaganda videos. Kotey is expected to be sentenced in the coming months.

In his opening statement, Mr. Gibbs detailed those videos. “ISIS took great pride in how violent they could be,” he said.

In plea documents, Kotey admitted that he and Mr. Elsheikh served as military cadets in England, engaged in street-level criminal activity, trained as boxers and were both arrested at a Sept. 11, 2011, demonstration protesting a memorial service honoring British victims of the terrorist attacks a decade earlier.

Collins Will Vote for High Court Nominee

By LINDSAY WISE AND NATALIE ANDREWS

WASHINGTON—Sen. Susan Collins of Maine said she would vote to confirm Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, the first Republican to back President Biden’s nominee.

Ms. Collins praised Judge Jackson Wednesday, saying she possesses the experience and academic and professional credentials to serve on the nation’s highest court. The senator acknowledged some disagreements with the judge but said they weren’t disqualifying.

“In my meetings with Judge Jackson, we discussed in depth several issues that were raised in her hearing,” Ms. Collins