

US students accused of Italy cop murder brace for trial

● **Finnegan Lee Elder and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, teenagers at the time of the attack last July, have been charged with killing newlywed Mario Cerciello Rega**

● **The pair are expected in court for the first hearing**

AFP | Rome

Two US students go on trial in Italy on Wednesday over the fatal stabbing last year of a policeman in Rome during a botched drug bust.

Finnegan Lee Elder and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, teenagers at the time of the attack last July, have been charged with killing newlywed Mario Cerciello Rega, 35, who was stabbed 11 times. They face a life sentence if convicted.

The pair are expected in court for the first hearing in a case that has garnered heated media coverage in Italy and strong public sympathy for Cerciello, who had just returned to work from his honeymoon when he was killed.

But the case has been marked by inconsistencies as well as missteps by police -- including the blindfolding of Natale-Hjorth during his police interrogation, which caused outrage. Comparisons have been made to the high-profile trial of Amanda Knox, a US student convicted and later acquitted of a 2007 murder in Italy.

Californian native Elder, who was in Rome on holiday



Police officer Mario Cerciello had just returned to work from his honeymoon when he was killed in the botched drugs bust

Californian native Elder, who was in Rome on holiday with high-school friend Natale-Hjorth, has admitted to stabbing Cerciello with a 7-inch (18 cm) combat knife, but told investigators he thought he and his friend were being attacked by drug dealers.

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Cerciello and his partner Andrea Varriale had been tasked

with intercepting the teens after an intermediary on a drug deal reported them to the police hours earlier for stealing his bag when they were sold aspirin in the place of cocaine.

The officers knew where they would be, because the intermediary had agreed to hand over money and cocaine in exchange for his bag at a designated meeting place in an upscale neighbourhood near the teenagers' hotel.

The handover never took place, and the young men and key prosecution witness Varriale have given conflicting accounts of what happened next.

Maximum penalty

Elder, now age 20, told police they were jumped from behind by the officers as they rounded

a corner in a dark street, and believed they were thugs sent by the drug intermediary.

Varriale has said he and Cerciello, both in plain clothes and unarmed, told the young men they were police, but that Elder pulled out a knife and attacked Cerciello, while Natale-Hjorth wrestled with Varriale.

The teens then fled to their nearby hotel, where police later found the military knife hidden behind a ceiling panel. Surveillance footage capturing the police arriving and the young men fleeing indicated the attack lasted just 32 seconds.

Under Italian law, Natale-Hjorth, who was 18 years old last July, faces the same charge of "voluntary homicide" with a special circumstance of killing a police officer even

though he did not stab Cerciello.

Both young men are also charged with attempted extortion. They face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment in isolation.

No badges?

The prosecution plans to display in court Instagram photos of Elder posing with a knife and wads of cash, a judicial source said, painting him as a rich kid with a taste for drugs and violence who once seriously injured another teen during an illegal boxing match while in high school in San Francisco.

A source close to the Elder family said that the teen was "hit and kicked and spat on" by police during his interrogation.

"I'm concerned we have a prosecution that doesn't seem too terribly concerned with examining the actions or inactions

of the Carabinieri (police) that night as carefully as they do trying to make these boys look bad," said the source.

Last week, Elder's lawyer, Renato Borzone, said that a leaked jail conversation between Elder and his father which suggested Elder knew Cerciello was a policeman was poorly translated with key portions missing.

A new translation indicates Elder saying "they didn't show anything," referring to police badges, the Corriere della Sera newspaper reported. Moreover, Elder's apparent reference to a "tank" - interpreted as referring to a police car - was actually "bank," Borzone said.

In violation of police rules, the officers had been unarmed and without back-up. After the attack, an ambulance could not quickly locate them, potentially worsening the chances of saving Cerciello, who died in hospital.



A photograph taken of one of the suspects, Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, blindfolded during interrogation, appeared in media reports, causing outrage

Car drives into German carnival parade, several injured - police



A car drove into a carnival parade in Volkmarshen in central Germany

Reuters | Berlin

Ten people were injured yesterday after a car ploughed into a carnival parade in the western German town of Volkmarshen, police said, adding that the driver had been arrested.

Police declined to say if it was an accident or if the driver had deliberately rammed the car into the crowd.

German news website HNA cited witnesses as saying that the driver appeared to have deliberately targeted children and that he had driven into the crowd "at full throttle."

The incident comes less than a week after a gunman gunned down 11 people, including himself, in one of the worst racist attacks in Germany since World War Two.

Police cars and ambulances rushed to the scene in Volkmarshen, 263 miles, 423 km west of Berlin.

Carnival is hugely popular in parts of western Germany, especially in Rhineland cities such as Cologne and Duesseldorf, where festivities peak on "Rose Monday" with tens of thousands attending street parades featuring comical or satirical floats.

Lesotho PM in court over murder of estranged wife

Maseru | Lesotho

Lesotho Prime Minister Thomas Thabane appeared in court yesterday over the murder of his estranged wife after a weekend in which he was said to be receiving emergency medical care in South Africa.

In the latest twist of a saga that has gripped the southern African kingdom, the 80-year-old premier attended the magistrates court in the capital Maseru, a correspondent reported.

Charges had been expected to be formally read out to him for allegedly acting in "common purpose" in the June 2017 killing of 58-year-old Lipolelo Thabane, whom he was in the process of divorcing.

But after a brief sitting, the matter was deferred to the High Court and the prime minister was not formally charged.

He was accompanied by his current wife Maesaiah Thabane, 42, whom he married two months after Lipolelo's death and who is considered a co-conspirator in the murder case.

She has already been charged with murder and is out on bail.

Defence lawyer Qhalehang Letsika argued that Thabane should not be charged as long as he remained a prime minister.

"My client cannot be prosecuted while in office but he is not above the law," said Letsika,



Flashback to June 16, 2017: Thabane and his future wife, Maesaiah Thabane, attend his inauguration, two days after his wife's murder

adding the beleaguered premier was "entitled to immunity" because of his status.

During the hearing, the lawyer asked whether a sitting prime minister should be subject to criminal prosecution as this could mean that he be placed in custody.

Thabane had initially been due in court on Friday for the preliminary appearance but was a no-show, prompting police to warn they could issue an arrest warrant.

His aide initially said Thabane had gone to neighbouring South Africa for "routine" health checks, but later his office said he was seeking "emergency" medical attention and would appear in court on his return.

On Saturday police said Thabane's sick note said that the

premier would be "unfit" until February 27.

Wearing a navy-blue striped suit with a powder-blue shirt and flanked by his spouse, Thabane appeared nervous as the couple sat on one of the court benches.

Lipolelo's murder sent shockwaves through Lesotho -- a tiny landlocked nation of 2.2 million with a history of political turmoil.

She was gunned down outside her home in Maseru just two days before her husband took office. The couple had been embroiled in a bitter divorce.

The accusations against the prime minister came after communications records from the scene of the murder included Thabane's mobile phone number.

Togo President Faure Gnassingbe wins fourth term



Last May, Gnassingbe oversaw an overhaul of the constitution that allowed him to run this year -- and potentially remain in office until 2030

Lome

Togo President Faure Gnassingbe has won a fourth term in power, the national electoral commission declared yesterday, as his main rival accused authorities of fraud.

The incumbent leader took 72 percent of the vote share in the first round of the presidential election, the commission said, far ahead of former prime minister Agbeyome Kodjo, with 18 percent.

The widely expected win extends more than a half century of dynastic rule over the former French colony by Gnassingbe's family despite broad disillusionment over its failure to drag many out of poverty.

Gnassingbe has led the country of eight million people since taking over in 2005 following the death of his father Gnassingbe Eyadema, who ruled with an iron fist for 38 years.