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Cumberland County judge rules in favor of 3 death row inmates in Racial Justice Act cases



Staff photo by Raul Rubiera

Sheriff's deputies escort Al Lowry out of the courtroom

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A Cumberland County judge has removed three condemned inmates from death row, including killers of three law enforcement officers, in a ruling that says racism played a role in their murder trials and sentences.

Senior Resident Superior Court Judge Greg Weeks commuted the sentences to life without parole under the terms of the state's Racial Justice Act. The courtroom audience was packed with uniformed officers, and at one point a victim's relative was removed from the room after cursing the judge.

The defendants are Christina S. "Queen" Walters, the leader of a gang that killed two women and shot another in gang initiation murders in 1998; Quintel M. Augustine, convicted of shooting to death Fayetteville

police Officer Roy Turner Jr. in November 2001; and Tilmon Golphin, who killed N.C. Highway Patrol Troop Ed Lowry and Cumberland County sheriff's Deputy David Hathcock during a traffic stop in September 1997

The defendants' lawyers contended during a nine-day hearing in October that prosecutors had abused the rules of jury selection to prevent blacks from serving on their trial juries. Their evidence included statistics on jury selection patterns and prosecutors' handwritten notes from the time.

Prosecutors argued that there was no racial bias, and that statistical patterns are irrelevant because every murder case and juror selection decision is unique.

The state plans to appeal today's ruling.

Weeks said he considered the racial bias claims under the Racial Justice Act of 2009, which allows death row defendants to win such claims solely based on statistical patterns, and under the 2012 version of the act, which requires more than just statistical evidence.

Defense lawyers and prosecutors disagreed on which version of the law may be used.

Walters is a Lumbee Indian. The two victims in her case who died were white, and the survivor is black.

The other two defendants are black. Augustine's victim was black, and Golphin's were white.

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