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U.S.

Oklahoma Man Is Charged in Beheading of Co-Worker

By **TIMOTHY WILLIAMS** and **MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT** SEPT. 30, 2014

An Oklahoma man was charged Tuesday with first-degree murder in the beheading of a co-worker, but federal officials said they had found no links between him and Islamic extremist groups that have beheaded several Western hostages in the Middle East and North Africa in recent weeks.

The accused, Alton Nolen, 30, who worked on the production line of a food processing plant in Moore, Okla., remained in a hospital after being shot by the company's chief operating officer, who is also a reserve deputy sheriff, the authorities said.

The attack Friday was apparently spurred by Mr. Nolen's suspension from Vaughan Foods after an employee told supervisors that Mr. Nolen had made inflammatory statements about white people. Mr. Nolen is African-American.

Greg Mashburn, the district attorney for Cleveland County, where the attack occurred, said Mr. Nolen had used "some Arabic terms during the attack," but did not specify the terms. Mr. Nolen is a recent convert to Islam.

The employee who complained about Mr. Nolen's statements about white people — identified by the police as Traci Johnson, 43 — was stabbed and slashed in the face and neck during the attack, but has been released from a

hospital. It is unclear why Mr. Nolen attacked Colleen Hufford, 54, the beheaded victim.

In addition to the first-degree murder count, prosecutors charged Mr. Nolen with attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon. If he is convicted of first-degree murder, he faces a potential death sentence under Oklahoma law — a penalty Mr. Mashburn said he was likely to pursue.

Mr. Nolen was interviewed by F.B.I. agents and was “cooperative,” according to a law enforcement official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he did not want to be identified discussing a developing investigation. F.B.I. computer technicians and agents analyzed several of Mr. Nolen’s electronic devices, including his phone, the official said.

The F.B.I. uncovered evidence that Mr. Nolen, who called himself Jah’Keem Yisrael on social media, had looked at a wide range of religious materials, from the Bible to information related to Al Qaeda.

“It’s a mixed bag so far. Beyond being fired, we haven’t found another motive,” the official said, referring to Mr. Nolen’s job suspension.

The official said that the F.B.I. was attempting to discern whom Mr. Nolen interacted with online. The official said that Mr. Nolen, who had posted at least one photograph of a beheading on his Facebook page, had experience with knives because of his job at the food processing center.

Mr. Mashburn described a chaotic scene that started Friday after Mr. Nolen had been told that he had been suspended for making insulting remarks about white people to co-workers.

“He was basically saying he didn’t like white people and had an altercation with our second victim based on that,” Mr. Mashburn said, referring to Ms. Johnson. “There was some back-and-forth with Ms. Johnson, and that led to her complaint with the human resources department.”

But Mr. Mashburn said Ms. Johnson was one of three people Mr. Nolen may have been seeking at the plant because of some perceived injustice. “They were different races and different genders,” Mr. Mashburn said.

After leaving the personnel office and being escorted to his vehicle, Mr. Nolen drove home, retrieved what the prosecutor described as a “large kitchen knife” and drove back to the plant’s main office.

He attacked Ms. Hufford from behind as she was standing in a doorway, Mr. Mashburn said, and ultimately severed her head.

As other workers in the office tried to stop him by throwing chairs and kicking at him, Mr. Mashburn said, Mr. Nolen slashed and stabbed Ms. Johnson in the neck and face.

“We are aware that he did chase some people away with the knife,” Mr. Mashburn said.

Within moments, Mark Vaughan, the company’s chief operating officer, appeared with a rifle and fired three times. Mr. Nolen was struck once in the arm, the bullet passing through his abdomen, the authorities said.

The attack, Mr. Mashburn said, was “triggered by him having been suspended earlier that day” combined with “some sort of infatuation with beheadings.”

Beginning in 2011, Mr. Nolen spent two years in prison for assaulting and fleeing from a state highway patrol officer and for drug possession, the authorities said.

Mr. Nolen, who has a tattoo of Jesus on his chest and the Arabic phrase “As-salaamu alaikum” (“Peace be with you”) on his abdomen, was brought up in a Christian church, his mother, Joyce Nolen, said in a video posted on Facebook.

“My son was raised up in a loving home,” Ms. Nolen said. “My son was raised up believing in God. That’s what he believes in. My son was a good kid.”

Correction: September 30, 2014

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the name of the food processing plant where the attack took place. It is Vaughan Foods, not Vaughn.

Carol Cole-Frowe contributed reporting from Norman, Okla., and Julie Turkewitz from Denver.

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