

Judge orders convicted cop killer to take psychotropic drugs for competency

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TAMPA — In a case that has spent more than two decades in legal limbo, a judge made a groundbreaking decision Friday: Convicted cop killer Carlos Bello can be forced to take psychotropic medications in jail to make him competent enough to be sentenced.

Bello, 57, has been deemed incompetent at a dozen resentencing hearings in the past 20 years.

Prosecutors hope the ruling will end what they call Bello's manipulation of the system. When he's in a state hospital taking medications, doctors deem him competent. Once he's transported to jail, he stops, and the symptoms re-emerge. The difference? State hospitals could make him take his meds. Until now, the Hillsborough County jail could not.

Because of his mental state, Bello has spent most of his time since the 1987 conviction in medical facilities rather than prison.

The daughters of slain Tampa police Detective Gerald A. Rauff hope that will change, and that the man who fired the bullet that killed their 38-year-old father will finally be brought to justice.

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It happened on July 24, 1981, in a dingy concrete block house in East Tampa. Bello, a Cuban refugee who had arrived in the United States a year earlier, was selling 50 pounds of marijuana to an undercover detective for \$13,500 when police busted in to make an arrest. Crouched behind a dresser, Bello shot Detective Robert Ulriksen in the elbow, arm and stomach, prosecutors said. He then fired twice more, fatally piercing Rauff's heart.

With that, a man who had spent the previous decade in and out of Cuban mental hospitals entered the American justice system.

Bello tried to commit suicide. He became catatonic. Doctors diagnosed him with paranoid schizophrenia and medicated him at a hospital, only to find he would stop taking his medications in jail and deteriorate. In the 1980s, he was examined at least three times and found incompetent to stand trial. Doctors didn't deny he was mentally ill, but said he took advantage of his illness by exaggerating symptoms.

Six years after his arrest, a jury convicted him of murdering one detective and attempting to murder another. A judge sentenced him to die in the electric chair.

But in 1989, the Florida Supreme Court threw out the sentence, partly because Bello was made to wear leg shackles in court, which could have prejudiced the jury. The court ordered that Bello be resentenced.

Despite hearing after hearing after hearing, that still hasn't happened.

On Friday, Bello shuffled into the courtroom, long, scraggly, white beard hanging from his face, jailhouse pants sagging off his skinny, pallid body.

Bello's defense attorney said his schizoaffective disorder makes him depressed and hear voices that tell him to starve himself to death.

Bello doesn't want to take the drugs because they have side effects, including dizziness, internal restlessness and muscle contractions, Assistant Public Defender Marcia Perlin said.

She argued that this case didn't meet special conditions a judge would need to force the medication.

Prosecutor Darrell Dirks, who helped try Bello, said the case did fall within the conditions of a "significant government interest." Hillsborough Circuit Judge Ronald Ficarrota agreed.

"Any time the government seeks to have anyone medicated against their will, that certainly triggers a significant liberty interest," he said. "So I'm certainly not taking this motion or request from this state lightly ...

"There is an important government interest involved in this case, to bring a conclusion to the trial of Carlos Bello who has been charged with a very serious crime. ... Involuntary medicines will significantly further that interest."

The judge said he would wait on filing his order until doctors explain which medications they will require Bello to take.

Two sisters, now older than their father lived to be, watched it all happen and cried.

Though the death penalty is still an option, both would be content with watching him sentenced to life in prison.

It was the first time they'd seen the man who killed their father, and this was the closest they'd come to seeing him sentenced.

After Bello shuffled away, Kimberly Rauft walked up to the prosecutor, shook his hand, and said, "Thank you."

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