

Ga. killer on trial for Fla. Panhandle slaying

By BILL KACZOR

The Associated Press

Updated: 2:41 p.m. Friday, Feb. 4, 2011

Posted: 3:05 a.m. Friday, Feb. 4, 2011

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Plastic beads, blood, boots, charred bones and a bayonet will be key pieces of evidence as a convicted killer goes on trial for a second decapitation murder, a prosecutor said Friday.

Chief Assistant State Attorney Georgia Cappleman told jurors in her opening statement that Gary Michael Hilton's own words — on a self-made video and in statements to police and a fellow inmate — also will help prove the drifter killed Cheryl Dunlap, a 46-year-old nurse from nearby Crawfordville.

The balding, wiry Hilton, 64, already is serving a life prison sentence after pleading guilty to murdering 24-year-old hiker Meredith Emerson in Georgia. He faces a possible death sentence if convicted of kidnapping and murdering Dunlap. The trial that could take up to three weeks.

Both victims were decapitated and their bodies dumped in forested areas. Hunters found Dunlap's remains the Apalachicola National Forest southwest of Tallahassee in December 2007. Emerson's were discovered the next month in the Dawson Forest Wildlife Management Area near the north Georgia town of Cumming.

Authorities also suspect Hilton in at least three other slayings in North Carolina and Florida.

Assistant Public Defender Ines Suber told jurors most of the state's evidence is circumstantial and won't prove "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Hilton killed Dunlap.

Cappleman said Dunlap had gone to the National Forest planning to read a book and later meet a friend when she disappeared on Dec. 1, 2007.

"But this man, Mr. Hilton, as the evidence will show, had another plan for Miss Dunlap," the prosecutor said, turning and pointing at the defendant sitting behind her. "Miss Dunlap found herself in a situation, and ultimately came to an end, that is something that we only think about in nightmares."

Evidence will show Hilton held Dunlap captive for two days before killing her, Cappleman said.

Beads left in Dunlap's abandoned car matched others found at one of Hilton's forest campsites and in his backpack, she said, surmising they could have come from a strand broken during a struggle.

Microscopic evidence will show Hilton's double-bladed bayonet was used to puncture a tire on the victim's car, Cappleman said. She said Dunlap's blood was found on a sleeping bag and her DNA on a pair of hiking boots that Hilton tried to get rid of in trash bins at two Georgia convenience stores.

A charred human skull and hand bones were recovered from a burn pit on one of Hilton's campsites near where the rest of her remains had been found, Cappleman said. She said a cigarette butt with Hilton's DNA on it was found at the campsite.

The state will be unable to establish the beads are the same, Suber told jurors. She also said police did not find them during an initial search of the car nor when they later vacuumed it while looking for evidence before Hilton was arrested.

"And lo and behold when plastic beads become important to the case and the investigation, plastic beads are all of a sudden found in the car," Suber said.

She also said a medical examiner was unable to determine a cause of death and an anthropologist could not tell if the skull and hands found in the fire pit were male or female.

Just before opening statements, Circuit Judge Circuit Judge James Hankinson denied Suber's request for a one month delay in the trial. She said she has not yet been able to interview all of about 200 potential witnesses and a defense expert has not yet had a chance to review a 300-page sworn statement.

The trial been scheduled for last June, but it was continued due to Suber's heavy caseload.

Hankinson also refused her request to strike the jury because two jurors knew about the Georgia and North Carolina cases.

Emerson vanished on New Year's Day 2008 while hiking on the Appalachian Trail. Hilton was arrested at a north Georgia convenience store where he tried to dispose of Dunlap's boots, Cappleman said. He was charged initially with kidnapping Emerson, whose remains were found later.

Authorities suspect Hilton may be connected to the deaths an elderly couple, John and Irene Bryant, who disappeared on a hike in North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest in October 2007, and of 27-year-old Michael Scot Louis, who vanished a month later in Ormond Beach, Fla. Louis also was decapitated. Hilton has not been charged in those cases.

February 04, 2011 02:41 PM EST

Copyright 2011, The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.