

Nichols Conspiracy Evidence May Be OK'd

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McALESTER, Okla. (AP) - An Oklahoma judge has left the door open for bombing conspirator Terry Nichols to present evidence of a wider conspiracy in the Oklahoma City bombing.

But District Judge Steven Taylor said Monday that before a jury hears the evidence, Nichols must prove that additional conspirators committed specific, overt acts to plan and carry out the bombing.

"Mr. Nichols is going to be allowed to present his defense," Taylor said, ruling that prosecution motions to prevent Nichols from presenting evidence of other bombing suspects were premature.

Prosecutors have said there is no firm evidence of other suspects.

Defense attorney Mark A. Earnest said Nichols' defense team does not plan to offer the names of other conspirators. He said the defense wants to present circumstantial evidence that Timothy McVeigh conspired with others, possibly members of the Aryan Republican Army, a white supremacist group with anti-government views, to bomb the P. Murrah Federal Building.

Defense attorneys say the conspiracy was set up to cast blame on Nichols and shield other conspirators.

More than 350 people were sworn in Monday as potential jurors Monday for Nichols' trial on 161 counts of first-degree murder for the April 19, 1995, bombing, which killed 168 people. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

The jury orientation for 357 people was conducted under heavy security in a school auditorium a few blocks from the courthouse.

State District Judge Steven Taylor said the trial could be long and create personal hardships for jurors. Nichols, his attorneys and prosecutors were present at the orientation session.

Jury selection, expected to take two weeks, begins March 1. The trial is expected to last three to six months.

Nichols, 48, is already serving a federal life imprisonment sentence for the deaths of eight federal law enforcement officers. The state charges are for the other 160 victims and one of the victims' unborn child.

McVeigh was convicted of federal murder and weapons charges and executed in 2001.