

Appeals court throws out ex-casino worker's conviction in fatal robbery of Brink's guard



Uri Ammar, 31, shown in a family photo with his sister Cecile.

(Sun Sentinel / Handout Family photo provided by Uri Ammar's lawyers.)

An appeals court threw out this week the criminal conviction of a Hollywood man serving life in prison for his role in a robbery that resulted in the fatal shooting of an armored truck guard.

Uri Ammar, 31, has been imprisoned since shortly after the Aug. 21, 2011, robbery, which led to the shooting death of Brink's guard, Alvaro Lopez Ramos. Ramos, 26, was fatally shot while picking up cash from the Calder Race Track and Casino, which straddles the border between Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Several other people, including Vladimir Louissaint, 30, of Miami Gardens, who confessed to firing the fatal shots, also are serving life in prison for their roles in the offense.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Wednesday that Ammar's convictions must be dismissed because the trial judge violated his right to a speedy trial. The appellate judges ruled that the indictment against Ammar must be dismissed.

For now, it is unclear whether Ammar will be released from prison or whether the trial judge will allow federal prosecutors to file a new indictment and go to trial against him a second time. Jurors found Ammar guilty of robbery, conspiracy and a related firearms offense, but found him not guilty of playing a role in the murder.

"To this day, Uri absolutely maintains that he is innocent," Ammar's appellate lawyers, Marc Seitles and Ashley Litwin, said Wednesday.

They said they have not yet spoken to Ammar, who is in Coleman federal prison in Central Florida, but Ammar's family was very excited when they heard he had won his appeal.

"They were in tears, they were screaming with joy. We are all very happy with the court's decision," Seitles said.

Seitles said he hopes Senior U.S. District Judge Lawrence King will agree to release Ammar, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who was a security worker at the casino. The lawyer said he also hopes the judge will not allow prosecutors to seek a new indictment and trial against Ammar.

Prosecutors said the former security manager was one of a number of insiders at the track who helped set up the planned robbery. They said Ammar insisted on escorting the truck guard and led him to Louissaint.

The truck guard drew his gun and pointed it at Louissaint, according to court records. Louissaint shot first and the truck guard returned fire, prosecutors said. The guard was shot twice in the head and died, Louissaint was hit by a bullet to the leg.

Seitles, who was not Ammar's trial lawyer, said Ammar testified that the robbers approached him when they were planning the robbery and threatened to harm him and his family if he did not help them.

"He never believed there would be a firearm and he never believed there would be a death," Seitles said.

The appeals court found that the judge violated Ammar's right to a speedy trial, usually scheduled within 70 days of being charged, because he did not detail his reasons for agreeing to delay the trial. The trial could have been legally delayed if the judge had spelled out his reasons why he felt it was in the best interest of the public and "the ends of justice," the appeals court found.

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