

Just What Happened in the Trayvon Martin Shooting?



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A supporter signs his name to a poster for Trayvon Martin

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

"Tragedy." That word appears again and again in comments about the Trayvon Martin shooting in Sanford, Florida. Trayvon Martin was seventeen years old and unarmed. A twenty-eight-year-old neighborhood watch volunteer shot and killed him on a rainy night in February. He says he acted in self-defense. He says the teenager attacked him.

Trayvon Martin was black. The crime watch organizer, George Zimmerman, is white and Hispanic. Many accused him of racism. Many more denounced law enforcement officials for not bringing criminal charges. The United States Justice Department opened its own investigation.

This week, a Florida prosecutor, State Attorney Angela Corey, charged Mr. Zimmerman with murder.

ANGELA COREY: "Let me emphasize that we do not prosecute by public pressure or by petition. We prosecute based on the facts of any given case as well as the laws of the state of Florida."

On Thursday Mr. Zimmerman appeared before Seminole County Judge Mark Herr.

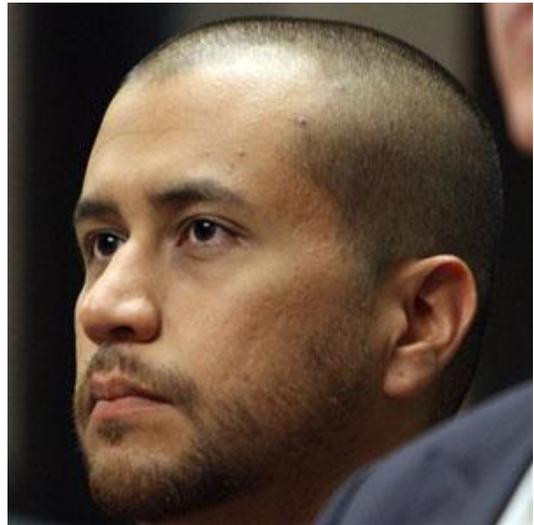
MARK HERR: "Mr. Zimmerman, you are here for your first appearances, a first appearance at this time for a charge of murder in the second degree. And you are represented by Mr. O'Mara? "

AP
George Zimmerman at his first court appearance

GEORGE ZIMMERMAN: "Yes sir."

MARK HERR: "Remember your right to remain silent."

The judge said there was enough evidence to move forward with the case. He told Mr. Zimmerman that he will be officially charged during an arraignment hearing on May twenty-ninth. A hearing is set for next Friday on the possibility of releasing him from jail on bond.



Defense lawyer Mark O'Mara said Mr. Zimmerman would plead not guilty but he worries about getting a fair trial.

MARK O'MARA: "We need to calm this down and this case needs to be tried in a courtroom."

The shooting happened in the gated community where the girlfriend of Trayvon Martin's father lives. Tracy Martin and Trayvon's mother, Sybrina Fulton, accuse Mr. Zimmerman of targeting their son because he was black. They led the protests to have him arrested.

SYBRINA FULTON: "We just wanted an arrest and we got it."

Police did not charge Mr. Zimmerman earlier because of a Florida law known as "Stand Your Ground." It says people have a right to meet force with force, to stand their ground and not turn and run. The Florida legislature passed the law in two thousand five.

Many other states have similar laws. Supporters say these laws can reduce violent crime and protect citizens who are trying to defend themselves. But Daniel Gross with the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence told members of Congress that the Florida law needs to be examined closer.

DANIEL GROSS: "In Florida, law enforcement authorities do not have the discretion to take away licenses to carry concealed weapons even from those who have killed unarmed people."

Jeb Bush signed the law when he was Florida governor. He says it was not meant for cases like this one.

JEB BUSH: "'Stand Your Ground' means 'Stand Your Ground.' It doesn't mean chase after somebody who's turned their back."

George Zimmerman had called the 911 emergency services number to report a suspicious person.

911 OPERATOR: "Are you following him?"

GEORGE ZIMMERMAN: "Yes."

911 OPERATOR: "We don't need you to do that."

Mr. Zimmerman later told police that he shot Mr. Martin after the teen struck him and hit his head on the ground.

President Obama commented on the case last month. He said when he thinks about Trayvon Martin, he thinks about his own children.

BARACK OBAMA: "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon."

Samantha Nolan is a neighborhood watch trainer in Washington. She tells volunteers never to chase anyone. In fact, she says the best way to fight crime is to just know your neighbors.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

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