

CULTISTS MAY HAVE BEEN FORCED TO STAY

By Sue Anne Pressley and

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WACO, TEX., APRIL 20 -- As forensic experts and medical examiners reported seeing charred bodies in the smoldering remains of the Branch Davidian compound today, authorities and parents said they believed that some members of the cult may have been trapped in the inferno against their will.

FBI officials continued to blame cult leader David Koresh for involving more than 80 adults and children in a mass suicide, but special agent Jeff Jamar also raised the possibility that "maybe some were forced to stay" as flames consumed their Ranch Apocalypse Monday.

Gunshots were heard as the fire started, leading to speculation that some cult members seeking to escape were hit before they could leave, Jamar said. One body inside bore a bullet hole in the head, he said, but he acknowledged that the victim could have been dead for weeks.

Tonight, Mike Cox, spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS), said Texas Rangers now in charge at the compound "say there are bodies all over the crime scene. All the bodies they have seen are charred. No one is easily recognizable." Some of the bodies were those of children, Cox said.

In their first conversations with lawyers, family members and other officials today, some of nine cult members who escaped the blaze insisted that the Davidians had no death pact. One survivor crashed through a window to safety, and another wriggled through a hole in the compound wall, their lawyers said.

"They were all overcome with smoke, engulfed in flames, and they were trying to get out," said Balenda Gamen, mother of cult member David Thibodeau, 24, formerly of Bangor, Maine.

She said her son, being held without bail as a material witness, told her that "he tried to run upstairs to help get more people out. But he couldn't. All he could do was get out himself."

It was not immediately clear how Thibodeau had escaped.

Thibodeau, a drummer with hair that flows to the middle of his back, was led into his detention hearing today at the federal courthouse in shackles and an orange jumpsuit. Spotting his mother in the courtroom, he smiled and said softly, "Hi, mom!" His only words to the judge were, "I'm going through a lot right now."

Tonight, Dick DeGuerin, Koresh's lawyer, said in an interview that, based on information he received from two survivors today, "It was not suicide. {The fire} was not deliberately set by David or his followers." He said he believed that the fire

was started by a "combination of lanterns, of battering rams, of tear gas canisters, of the bales of hay" and stored heating fuel.

Jeff Kearney, a Fort Worth attorney representing another survivor, Jaime Castillo, 24, of El Monte, Calif., said that, after conversations with Castillo, he is satisfied that "there was not a mass suicide." He did not elaborate. Castillo is charged with conspiracy to murder federal agents Feb. 28.

On that Sunday morning, one of the worst episodes in U.S. law enforcement history began when four agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) were shot and killed as they stormed the compound in an attempt to arrest Koresh.

A 51-day standoff ensued until Monday when FBI agents, using Army combat engineer vehicles and tear gas, assaulted the compound.

Many questions remain about the final moments of Koresh and his cult, and some may never be answered.

As FBI officials turned over the crime-scene investigation today to the Rangers, the law enforcement division of the DPS, officials would not say how many bodies may have been found.

Authorities' most recent, but unconfirmed, count of those inside before the assault was 95, including at least 24 children.

A Rangers spokesman said late today that investigators ended their search for bodies after deciding that the ruins were "too volatile."

Along with the body bearing a bullet wound, Jamar said, several other corpses were discovered in a schoolbus that the Davidians had sunk beneath the compound as a bunker.

Many more are expected to be found in a sealed concrete room inside the fortress, he said. The cult's ammunition was "cooking" in molten wreckage and creating a minefield for forensic experts, delaying the recovery effort, he said.

"If the bodies are still relatively intact, you can certainly determine a lot more than anybody imagines," said Norm Carmack of the chief medical examiner's office in Travis County (Austin).

He said questions about the timing of the deaths -- whether for instance, cult members were shot or poisoned before the fire or were killed by smoke inhalation -- probably can be answered.

While medical experts worked to identify bodies, using dental charts and descriptions from families, fire investigators tried to isolate the cause of the blaze. There was concern today about whether the ATF, which often investigates arson, should be assigned the case because its failed role in the Feb. 28 raid might affect the credibility of its findings, a law enforcement source said.

FBI officials have said they are positive that cult members purposely set several fires at the compound Monday. Agents on the scene said they saw one person climb out on the roof, "get down with cupped hands and then there was a flash of

fire," Jamar said.

Jamar fiercely disputed an accusation, made today by cult survivor Renos Avraam as he entered court, that the fire started when a tank ramming the building overturned a kerosene lantern. "There is no doubt in our minds that people in the compound started multiple fires," he said.

The magnitude of the blaze apparently is hindering the investigation. "If the fire originated on the second floor, and the second floor is gone, it will be difficult to reconstruct the exact point of origin," said Dick Langran, chief of the arson division of the Dallas Fire Department.

A Rangers spokesman said a thorough search of the rubble is expected to take two weeks.

There were also many questions about why authorities decided to move with tear gas Monday. Koresh had reneged on several promises to surrender, and authorities said they did not believe his statement last week that he would emerge after completing a complicated decoding of the Seven Seals from the Bible's Book of Revelation. Jamar said today that Koresh had not even begun work on the first seal, as he had claimed.

"This latest business with the Seven Seals, we have intelligence on that that it was just one more stalling technique," Jamar said. "We could've waited two months, three months. But where does that leave us? . . . If we waited 90 days, the children could've been dying of hunger, dying of disease."

Perhaps the major question is why the FBI did not anticipate Koresh's apparent reaction to increased pressure Monday. FBI officials said he clearly could have saved the children, thought to include 17 under age 10, but chose not to do so.

Throughout the long standoff, FBI officials seemed to sway back and forth on the question of whether Koresh was capable of ordering suicides. "We heard several times that he was suicidal, but he told us over and over again that he was not going to commit suicide," Jamar said today.

On Monday, FBI spokesman Bob Ricks noted that two days after the Feb. 28 gun battle Koresh had attached grenades to his body and set out to commit suicide in front of television cameras. But Koresh "chickened out," Ricks said.

Asked if the Branch Davidians' deaths were "another Jonestown," a reference to the colony in Guyana where more than 900 followers of the Rev. Jim Jones drank poisoned Kool-Aid in 1978, Jamar replied:

"Is it a place where the leader caused the death of all the people in the compound? Yes, it was another Jonestown."

Officials defended their decision to use tear gas and battering rams by saying that conditions inside the compound had worsened and that Koresh had become more violent. "We were of the opinion things were deteriorating in there," Jamar said.

Defense lawyer Kearney disagreed, saying, "It sounds like there was an assault by the government on their home. A lot of things here have gone too fast, like the FBI yesterday moving in."

Kearney expressed concern that loss of evidence because of the fire would only enhance the government's case against the cult. "Government agents can say whatever they want, and there is little physical evidence remaining to prove it," he said.

Special correspondent Elizabeth Hudson in Austin, Tex., contributed to this report.

 **Comments**

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