

Former U.S. police officer pleads guilty in George Floyd killing



Alexander Kueng, second officer to plead guilty to state charge, agrees to deal that calls for three and a half years in prison.

Minneapolis, October 24 (RHC)-- A former police officer in the U.S. city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, has pleaded guilty to aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter in the killing of George Floyd just as jury selection was about to begin.

Another former officer waived his right to a jury trial, setting up an unusual proceeding in which the judge will issue a verdict after lawyers submit written arguments.

The plea deal for J Alexander Kueng calls for three and a half years in prison after prosecutors agreed to drop a count of aiding and abetting second-degree murder. Kueng is the second officer to plead guilty to the state charge following Thomas Lane, who pleaded guilty in May.

Their former colleague Tou Thao has rejected a plea deal, telling a judge it “would be lying” to accept any such deal. On Monday, he agreed to go forward with a modified proceeding called a trial by stipulated evidence, in which he accepts certain evidence against him and waives his rights to a trial by jury and to testify.

The two sides will work out agreed-upon evidence against Thao and will prepare written closing arguments. They will submit those to Judge Peter Cahill by November 17 with Cahill to rule on guilt or innocence within 90 days.

The process, called a trial by stipulated evidence, included an agreement to drop the charge of aiding murder if Thao is convicted on the lesser charge. With such a conviction, Thao would likely get about four years in prison.

All three men were convicted in February on federal counts of willfully violating the civil rights of Floyd, 46, who died on May 25, 2020, after officer Derek Chauvin pinned him to the ground with a knee on Floyd's neck as he repeatedly said he couldn't breathe.

Lane was sentenced to two and a half years in the federal case. Kueng was sentenced to three years, and Thao was sentenced to three and a half, but for some Floyd family members and activists, the penalties were too small.

Floyd's killing, captured on video by a bystander, sparked protests in Minneapolis and around the globe as part of a reckoning over racial injustice. Kueng and Lane helped to restrain Floyd, who was handcuffed. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held down Floyd's legs. Thao kept bystanders from intervening during the nine and a half minutes that Floyd was restrained.

As part of his plea agreement, Kueng admitted that he held Floyd's torso, that he knew from his experience and training that restraining a handcuffed person in a prone position created a substantial risk and that the restraint of Floyd was unreasonable under the circumstances. Kueng's plea called for him to serve his state and federal terms at the same time, just as Lane is doing.

Chauvin was convicted of state murder and manslaughter charges last year and is currently serving 22 and a half years in the state case. He also pleaded guilty to a federal charge of violating Floyd's civil rights and was sentenced to 21 years for that and for an unrelated case involving a 14-year-old boy. He is serving the sentences at the same time at the Federal Correctional Institution in Tucson, Arizona.

Kueng, Lane and Thao were convicted of federal charges in February after a monthlong trial that focused on the officers' training and the culture of the police department. All three were convicted of depriving Floyd of his right to medical care, and Thao and Kueng were also convicted of failing to intervene to stop Chauvin during the killing.

After their federal sentences, there were questions about whether Kueng and Thao would proceed to trial, with legal experts saying it was likely they would seek a plea deal with the state that would not exceed the federal sentence and allow them serve both sentences at the same time.

State sentencing guidelines for a person with no criminal record, like Kueng, call for a range from about three and a half years to four years and nine months in prison for second-degree unintentional manslaughter. The presumptive sentence is four years. If Kueng had been convicted of aiding and abetting second-degree murder, he would have faced 12 and a half years in prison.

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