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Bloody sheets cause delay ... Court officials say they see human remains falling from evidence

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BOISE -- Sarah Johnson's murder trial was halted two hours early on Thursday when prosecutors spread out blood-covered bed sheets and court officials became concerned over "body pieces" falling to the floor.

Prosecutors had placed the bloody sheets on which Diane Johnson had been sleeping when she was shot through the head onto a makeshift bed frame. They were just about to call blood-spatter expert Rod Englert to testify when court officer Steve McKissick stepped forward and expressed concern that the sheets could potentially produce airborne "biohazards."

"I suggest we find another way to present the evidence," he said, noting that his concern was with the safety and security of the jurors. Judge Barry Wood agreed, saying that "body pieces" had fallen out of the sheets as they were opened up.

"I did not know you were unpackaging the evidence," Wood said to prosecuting attorneys Jim Thomas and Justin Whatcott, who had taken the sheets out of a sealed plastic evidence bag. "I have a responsibility to the jury, to the court staff, and the other people in court."

The judge adjourned court for the day and ordered the area to be cleaned before Friday's proceedings.

Sarah Johnson, 18, is on trial in connection with the fatal shootings of her parents, Alan and Diane, in their Blaine County home the morning of Sept. 2, 2003. Prosecutors say Sarah shot her mother in the head while she slept, and then turned the rifle on her father, shooting him in the chest as he showered. Alan made his way into the bedroom, and died next to the bed in which his wife had been killed.

Thursday's proceedings began with the continued questioning of Malinda Gonzales, who had spent three weeks in the same Blaine County Jail cell as

Sarah Johnson after being arrested in October 2003 for felony drug charges. Her profanity-laced testimony was punctuated by yawns and snickers as she addressed defense attorney Bob Pangburn by his last name.

"You have told investigators that you hated Sarah's attorney," Pangburn said to Gonzales as he began his cross examination, to which she agreed.

Gonzales chuckled and sneered at Pangburn as he questioned her about whether she had received leniency or compensation in exchange for her testimony against Sarah Johnson.

"This is a joke to you, isn't it?," Pangburn asked her.

"Pangburn, it's not a joke. You're the joke to me," she fired back, adding, "It's not about compensation for me."

Defense attorneys argued to the jury that Gonzales made up incriminating statements and attributed them to Sarah Johnson in an attempt to gain leniency on her 16-year prison sentence.

Under questioning, Gonzales told both Pangburn and prosecuting attorney Jim Thomas that she was testifying "because it's the right thing to do."

"My parents are important to me, and I can't be with my parents. I don't want anything to happen to them. That's why I came here today," Gonzales said.

She said that since agreeing to testify against Sarah Johnson, she has been attacked twice by other inmates who now see her as a "narc."

The life of a narc in prison is "terrible," she said, adding that "one girl found out and threw a hot cup of coffee in my face, and another one hit me and she ended up in the hole for 30 days."

Daniel Tiller, a former probation officer with the Idaho Department of Correction, testified that when he talked with Gonzales in her pre-sentencing meeting she did not ask for leniency for providing information about Sarah. But, she still told him what she knew.

"She told me she was a cellmate of Sarah Johnson's and that she had to tell someone about what was going on in the cell, the statements," Tillman told the jury. "She described conversations, statements that were incriminating in nature. She seemed to explode with a desire to tell me something, and I listened."

One of the first things Gonzales told him about, he said, was Sarah's near-confessional statements she had made about killing her parents while watching Sheriff Walt Femling's press conference on television.

On Wednesday, Gonzales had testified that Sarah Johnson had all but admitted to killing her parents. She said that as they watched the Blaine County sheriff's press conference on television about the murder, Sarah turned to Gonzales and said, "When I killed -- I mean, when the killers killed my parents ..."

Gonzales also told Tillman that Sarah had spoken about the descriptions of the weapons used to murder the Johnsons and the placement of large kitchen knives at the scene of the crime.

Gonzales had testified Wednesday that while watching Femling's press conference on TV Sarah said, "Walt didn't say anything about the knives. Why didn't they put on anything about the knives?" When Gonzales asked why there were knives at the murder scene, Sarah told her, "to throw off the cops."

In reference to the knives, Femling told the jury in his testimony Thursday that he had not publicly spoken at his press conferences about the large kitchen knives that had been found at the foot of the Johnsons' bed.

"We felt the knives were placed there to throw us off track," Femling said. "We don't give out all our information to the public -- there's some we keep to ourselves."

"I never gave Malinda (Gonzales) any information on the knives, and we never released it to the public," Femling testified, inferring that whatever information Gonzales had about such details she gained through conversations with Sarah Johnson.

The prosecution is expected to rest its case today after Sarah's brother Matt takes the witness stand.