

Judge Delays South Carolina Church Massacre Trial

A judge delayed the federal trial for the white man accused of shooting dead nine parishioners at a historic black church in Charleston last June after federal prosecutors on Thursday said the government remained undecided on seeking the death penalty.

The Justice Department's deliberations are nearing completion, but it could be April before a decision is announced, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jay Richardson said in court.

Dylann Roof, 21, faces 33 federal hate crime and firearms charges after authorities said he opened fire during a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in a crime that shocked the nation and sparked a fierce debate about race and gun control.

Roof wants to plead guilty if the death penalty is not sought, his attorney, David Bruck, told the judge. He said the defense was not ready for trial until that decision had been made.

U.S. District Judge Richard Gergel agreed to continue the case at the request of prosecutors and defense attorneys. Both sides are due to report back in court in the early spring.

Roof also faces state murder charges for which prosecutors are seeking the death penalty. The state trial is scheduled to begin in July. He has not entered a plea in the state case.

Gergel last week also delayed the case of Roof's friend Joseph Meek, who is charged with concealing knowledge of a felony crime and lying to an FBI agent after the shooting. Meek's attorney sought more time to review evidence. {eoa}