

Alabama church fire suspects appear in court

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By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Three college students accused of burning Alabama churches made their first appearance in a federal court on Wednesday to determine if they could be released to their parents on bond.

Russell DeBusk and Benjamin Moseley, both 19, and Matthew Cloyd, 20, were charged last week with setting fires that damaged or destroyed nine Baptist churches in rural Alabama.

The men were charged with conspiracy and committing malicious destruction by fire. They could face up to five years in prison for each of the nine fires.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Robert Armstrong, Jr. told the three men he would decide by Thursday whether to release them.

In a pretrial report, probation officials recommended the release of the three suspects with electronic ankle monitors and 24-hour supervision from their parents.

Defense lawyers agreed to \$50,000 bonds for the trio, and all three sets of parents pledged to alert officials if their sons violated the terms of their release.

Prosecutors want the suspects held until trial.

"These were acts of violence. These men -- and they are men your honor, they are not boys -- saw volunteer firemen rush to these fires. This is not some aberrant juvenile prank," Assistant U.S. Attorney Herbert Henry said.

During the hearing, Walker Johnson, a special agent with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, outlined the dates and times of the nine church burnings. In the second fire, which burned Ashby Baptist Church, two firefighters were injured, one by falling debris that cracked his helmet.

In court documents, a federal agent quoted Moseley as saying the three had gone to Bibb County, Alabama, to shoot deer on February 2 and had set fire to five rural churches early the next morning. A witness quoted Cloyd as saying that was done "as a joke, and it got out of hand."

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