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6 Go on Trial Over London Arson Attack Blamed on Russia's Wagner Group

By Reuters

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The Old Bailey court in London. **It's No Game / flickr**

Six men went on trial on Wednesday over an arson attack that prosecutors say was carried out on behalf of Russia's Wagner mercenary group on a business in London involved in shipping goods to Ukraine.

The warehouse units torched in March last year on an industrial estate in east London belonged to Oddisey, a company that delivered packages and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including satellite equipment from Elon Musk's Starlink. Russia began a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Paul English, 61, Nii Kojo Mensah, 23, Jakeem Rose, 23, and Ugnius Asmena, 20, deny charges of aggravated arson. Dmitrijus Paulauskas, 23, and Ashton Evans, 20, deny knowing about terrorist acts but failing to disclose the information.

Prosecutor Duncan Penny told London's Old Bailey court that the arson was criminality "at the behest of foreign influence."

He said it was organized by Dylan Earl, who was "knowingly acting at the behest of the Wagner Group," banned by Britain as a terrorist organization.

Last October, Earl admitted aggravated arson and also pleaded guilty to preparing conduct for acts which endangered life under a new National Security Act (NSA), brought in to crack down on hostile activity by foreign states.

"It appears that Dylan Earl expressed a willingness to undertake ‘missions’ of which the Leyton arson attack was the first. It is apparent that [he] knew he was acting against Ukrainian, and for Russian, interests," Penny said.

Another man, Jake Reeves, 23, pleaded guilty in November to charges of aggravated arson and admitted a charge under the NSA of obtaining a material benefit from a foreign intelligence agency, meaning he accepted taking money from Wagner that was to be provided by Russian security services, Penny said.

He said Earl and Reeves were also involved in a plot to carry out arson attacks on the Hedonism wine shop and Hide restaurant in the upmarket Mayfair district of London, together valued in excess of 30 million pounds ($40.7 million).

Penny said the plot also involved kidnapping the owner, a high-profile Russian dissident and vocal critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who had personally driven aid trucks from Britain to Ukraine.

In messages to the two men shown to the court, Earl said the target should be brought to him so he could be "exhiled [sic] to Russia to face prison."

In recent years, British authorities have accused Russia or its agents of being behind a number of spy plots and sabotage missions in Britain and across Europe. The U.K.'s domestic spy chief said Russian operatives were trying to cause "mayhem."

The Kremlin has denied these accusations, and its embassy in London has rejected any part in the warehouse fire, saying the British government repeatedly blames Russia for anything "bad" that happens in Britain.

Wagner

Wagner had been heavily engaged in the earlier part of Russia's war effort in Ukraine, until its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin led a short-lived mutiny against Russia's defense establishment in 2023.

Penny said the jury would hear expert evidence that the group and its activities, which included sabotage in Europe, were now under the direct command of the Russian government.

He told the court the six men on trial might have been ignorant of the political dimension and motivated by greed over the warehouse blaze, which led to an insurance claim estimated at over 1 million pounds ($1.36 million).

The jury was shown messages between the men which Penny said showed their involvement, as well as footage from security cameras and their own phones which he said showed the men traveling to the warehouse and starting the fire with petrol.

The trial, which is due to last up to five weeks, continues.

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