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MASPETH MAN CHARGED WITH MURDER AND ARSON FOR SETTING FIRE AT FLUSHING HOME THAT KILLED FOUR AND INJURED OTHERS, INCLUDING TWO FDNY MEMBERS

*Defendant Attempted to Enter Building Before Fire; Went to Nearby Gas Station, Asked for Matches and Set Combustible Trash on Fire at Bottom of Stairway
Faces up to 25 Years to Life, if Convicted*

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced that Roman Amatitla was charged with eight counts of murder in the second degree, arson in the first degree and related charges for setting a fire that killed four occupants of a Flushing building and injured seven others, including two firefighters. The defendant allegedly used matches from a nearby gas station to start the blaze and then watched as the building burned.

DA Katz said: “This was an act of mass murder. As alleged, Roman Amatitla deliberately set a fire in an occupied building and killed four people, including a 3-year-old girl. Shockingly, the defendant had no known connection to the building or any of its occupants and selected the building at random. I thank the brave FDNY members who risked their lives to save others in the building and the NYPD and US Marshals Service for apprehending this defendant.”

Amatitla, 38, of Maspeth, was charged in a criminal complaint with eight counts of murder in the second degree, arson in the first degree, two counts of assault in the first degree, arson in the second degree, two counts of assault in the second degree and petit larceny. He was arraigned before Criminal Court Judge Thomas Wright-Fernandez who remanded him and ordered him to return to court April 13. He faces up to 25 years to life, if convicted.

DA Katz said that, according to the charges and investigation, on March 16, at approximately 11:43 a.m., Roman Amatitla entered the ground floor of a three-story building at 132-05 Avery Avenue in Flushing and left the premises approximately a minute later. The defendant remained in the vicinity of the property for another 15 minutes and then urinated in front of the location. Amatitla entered and exited the premises two more times in the following seven minutes.

The defendant then crossed the street and went into a nearby gas station, where he purchased a beer, stole another beer and asked the clerk for a lighter. When the clerk informed Amatitla that lighters were not free, the defendant settled for a pack of matches.

Amatitla then entered the building for a fourth time, lit a piece of paper on fire and placed the flaming paper on top of garbage located near a stairwell.

Shortly afterward, smoke began to fill the street. The defendant stayed in the immediate area and watched the fire consume the building.

Responding firefighters discovered a 3-year-old girl, Sihan Yang, on a third-floor bed and she was pronounced deceased on the scene. A 49-year-old male, Chengri Cui, and a 61-year-old female, Shin Chie Ming, were also both discovered in the building and pronounced deceased on the scene. All three succumbed to smoke inhalation.

Hong Zhao, a 64-year-old male, leaped from a building window and sustained multiple broken bones and brain trauma. He was pronounced deceased at a nearby hospital at 2:30 p.m.

Two members of the FDNY, a lieutenant and firefighter, entered the burning building to conduct rescues. Both fell to the basement when the staircase connecting the first floor to the second and third floors collapsed. They were transported to Jacobi Hospital for smoke inhalation and thermal burns.

Four building occupants were injured when they jumped from the building to escape the blaze and one remains hospitalized. A fifth occupant was rescued from a second-floor window by the FDNY and was treated

for smoke inhalation.

Assistant District Attorney Gabriel J. Reale of the District Attorney's Homicide Bureau is prosecuting the case, with the assistance of Assistant District Attorney Jennie Evangelista, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys John Kosinski, Bureau Chief, Karen Ross and Jonathan Selkove, Deputy Chiefs, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Major Crimes Shawn Clark.

Criminal complaints and indictments are accusations. A defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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