

10 July 1972

The military trial of Kozo Okamoto began today in a tightly secured court compound at Sarafand (phonetic) Army base in Israel. Mr. Okamoto is charged with four criminal courts, three of which carry as a maximum penalty the death sentence. The charges arise out of the shooting last May at Lud Airport in Tel Aviv in which 26 people were killed and another 67 wounded. Mr. Okamoto pleaded guilty to the charges, although he disputed some of the individual facts cited by the prosecution. The three-man court rejected the guilty pleas, substituting a plea of partial admission and requiring the prosecution to present its entire case. In a news conference held during a recess, Mr. Okamoto's defense lawyers explained that the court was required to reject the guilty pleas because Israeli law prohibits a plea of guilty in a capital case. The lawyers added that they had in fact expected Mr. Okamoto to enter no plea at all, but that the defendant had promised them he would remain silent.

However, chief defense lawyer Max Kirtzman also said that he was puzzled by the court's ruling on the guilty plea. He said he did not understand why the court could not simply have registered a plea of innocence instead of going into this whole complexity of partial admission. Anyway, as it stands, the court will still hear all the prosecution's witnesses.

Later in today's proceedings, the defense lawyers requested that Mr. Okamoto be given a mental examination, to determine his state of mind during the May shooting. Mr. Kirtzman told the court that he is not contending that Mr. Okamoto is presently insane, but that an examination is necessary to determine whether the defendant was sane at the time of the shooting or whether he was under some irreversible influence or under the influence of drugs.

When his lawyers made the request for an examination, Mr. Okamoto lost his composure for the only time today, interrupting the proceedings with shouts of, "I don't want an examination, I don't want an examination." The court declined to rule on the request immediately, but took the matter under advisement.

The defense lawyers then challenged the validity of the confession obtained from Mr. Okamoto. Mr. Kirtzman said the commanding general of Israel's central army command, Maj. Gen. Rehavam Ze'vi, promised to let the accused commit suicide if he confessed. According to Mr. Kirtzman, Gen. Ze'vi said a gun would be put at Mr. Okamoto's disposal if he cooperated. The court then requested that Gen. Ze'vi appear in court Tuesday.

After these defense challenges, the prosecution outlined its case. Chief Prosecutor David Israel said he would show that Mr. Okamoto flew to Lebanon to train with two other men for a suicide mission on behalf of the Arab Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The three-man team intended to accomplish their crime and then commit suicide in such a way that their faces would be disfigured beyond recognition. Prosecutor Israel then presented the first of 13 witnesses he expects to call, bringing the first of a four- or five-day trial to a close.