

# Abbas sentenced to life term, Klinghoffer's killer gets 30 years

Associated Press

GENOA, Italy — Fugitive Palestinian guerrilla leader Mohammed Abbas and five followers were convicted yesterday of hijacking the Achille Lauro cruise ship and killing a wheelchair-bound American passenger.

Abbas and two fellow fugitives were given life sentences, but the hijacker accused of actually killing 69-year-old Leon Klinghoffer received a lesser sentence — 30 years in prison.

Five defendants were convicted of lesser charges in the hijacking, and four others, all fugitives, were acquitted.

Italian authorities acknowledged there was little chance that Abbas, said to have masterminded the hijacking, would ever serve his term.

Three of the hijackers, who were

among the five defendants in custody, received prison terms ranging from 15 to 30 years. Prosecutor Luigi Francesco Meloni said he probably would appeal for stiffer sentences.

Defense lawyers said they also planned to appeal.

Under Italian law, those convicted can be considered for parole only after half their sentence has been served.

Klinghoffer's daughters and several Americans who were held hostage during the Oct. 7-9 hijacking criticized the hijackers' sentences as too lenient.

"We had every hope that the Italian judicial system would impose the maximum penalty possible," Lisa and Ilsa Klinghoffer said in a joint statement issued in New York. "Sadly, we are greatly disillusioned and disappointed."

The hijacking's aftermath severely

strained U.S.-Italian relations and caused the government to fall briefly when Italian authorities refused to detain Abbas after a U.S. warplane forced an Egyptian jet carrying him and the hijackers to land in Sicily.

Despite a U.S. warrant for Abbas, leader of the Palestine Liberation Front faction of the PLO, Italian officials at first said they lacked evidence he had any role in the hijacking other than helping negotiate its end. They later issued a warrant for him but he had gone underground.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said, "The United States is pleased that persons responsible for the death of an American citizen and injury and damages to others have been convicted."

But he added, "We regret that the murder of Leon Klinghoffer was not treated more severely."

Kalb also said the U.S. government "reserved its legal right to seek extradition of the hijackers once all Italian legal proceedings, including appeals, are ended."

Four Palestinians commandeered the Achille Lauro off Egypt and demanded Israel release 51 jailed Palestinians. Klinghoffer was shot to death and thrown overboard.

After the hijackers surrendered, they were transported on an Egyptian airliner bound for Tunisia, purportedly for trial by the Palestine Liberation Organization, when U.S. fighter planes forced the jet to land in Sicily. One of the accused hijackers, Bassam al-Ashker, was 17 at the time and faces trial later in juvenile court.