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Finding on Jonestown: Few Facts Emerged

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

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GEORGETOWN, Guyana — The conclusion of the coroner's jury's that the Rev. Jim Jones murdered nearly all of his followers in Guyana was less a conclusion to the Jonestown saga than a departure point for new chapters.

News Analysis

Already, a grand jury in San Francisco is taking testimony on the People's Temple cult, and with the turn of the year the House Committee on International Relations will begin another investigation.

The verdict, reached Friday in the isolated former manganese mining town of Matthews Ridge, should not greatly influence American investigators, for it grew less from incontrovertible evidence than from the minds of the two East Indian lawyers who imposed their opinions on a docile jury — Haroon Bacchus, the magistrate, and Emanuel Romao.

The truth of the matter is that very little documentation of the more than 900 deaths Nov. 18 has been developed.

At this point, one can reason and one can speculate about what happened at Jonestown, but as for knowing for certain, that is not possible.

So it can be argued with almost equal fervor either that Mr. Jones killed his followers or that at least some of them killed themselves.

Those who have heard the tape recording of part of the final hours of the tragedy say that Mr. Jones was coaxing his people to die and to die swiftly. One woman was heard arguing against him, but most of the others reportedly seemed to be sticking with the cult leader.

Heard Abbreviated Version

The coroner's jurors did not hear the tape. What they heard, essentially, was an abbreviated version of the admittedly scanty evidence in the hands of the Government that Mr. Romao held "sufficient for any reasonable jury to come to the conclusion that this was murder."

When it came time for the jurors to deliver a verdict, Mr. Bacchus spoke as if he were the prosecutor.

"I would ask you to say," he told the jurors, "that Jim Jones and his associates, which would include his medical team, murdered those persons."

The argument that Mr. Jones committed mass murder with a long, slow condi-

Jury's Verdict Is Departure Point for Question of Murder or Suicide

tioning process, in which his followers' individual powers of choice were eroded and their dependence on him multiplied, seems difficult to sustain. Nothing so far has emerged to demonstrate a clear intent to murder.

Mr. Romao's contention was that Mr. Jones planned to kill his followers and escape with Ann Elizabeth Moore, his 24-year-old personal nurse, to spend the millions of dollars he had stashed in banks in Latin America. He did not have an explanation of the letters bequeathing the money to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Theory for Suicide

One of the strongest arguments in behalf of the suicide theory is that the cult leader led his people to their death, ranting in the words of lost hope so often on the minds of those who take their own lives.

He seemed convinced that the visit by Representative Leo J. Ryan and the defection of more than a dozen cultists threatened the existence of the commune. Most of his followers, survivors say, seemed to agree. When the Congressman left, the community reportedly fell into a stunned silence. Then came word that Mr. Ryan had been killed. It would not be long, Mr. Jones told his followers, before government soldiers would arrive to attack the commune, castrate the men and torture the women and children.

The deaths of Mr. Jones and Miss Moore are equally equivocal.

At first, the jurors said they believed that the cult leader had killed himself. But when the magistrate flew into a rage and the prosecutor protested that the evidence indicated otherwise, the jurors said it must have been murder.

Mr. Jones died of a bullet fired into his head, just above the right ear, at close range. Dr. Leslie Mootoo, the chief pathologist here, said the wound was "consistent with suicide." But the .38 revolver the police believe killed Mr. Jones was found more than 20 yards from his body.

Miss Moore, who the jurors said they believed committed suicide, died of a gunshot wound, too. The left rear quarter of her head was so badly damaged that the police could not tell where the bullet had entered.

Dr. Mootoo told the jurors flatly that Miss Moore "was murdered." But they were apparently swayed by C.A. Roberts, the assistant police commissioner for crime who headed the government's investigation. Mr. Roberts told the jurors he had found a 3.75 magnum revolver and a stenographer's notebook — a diary, he called it — containing a death note near the nurse's head.

The prosecutor contended privately that the notebook had been planted by a murderer. The notebook, he said, "doesn't have a spot on it and the room was splattered with brains and blood." "How could anything a foot from the head not be splattered, too?" he asked.

Maria Katsaris, who was in charge of the commune's finances and was one of Mr. Jones's mistresses, died, like most of the others, of acute cyanide poisoning, the pathologist reported.

Say She Committed Suicide

But the jurors said that, unlike the others, she had not been murdered but had committed suicide. That was obvious, they reasoned, because she left behind a note, which seemed to be intended as a will, handing over money under her control in a Venezuelan bank to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Except for Miss Moore, the other cultists did not leave notes.

The jurors did not try to decide whether a fourth person — a yet unidentified white man who medical examiners belatedly discovered had been shot — had been murdered.

Some of those who believe in the murder theory have faith that the Americans will somehow be able to bring charges against more of the survivors.

But no one expects answers to all the remaining questions about the strange community that rose up in the jungle that Guyana's coastal dwelling people long ago gave over to the Amerindians, the bush master snakes and the jaguars.

The police say they have no more trails to explore, but Mr. Romao says the case "will never really be finished." "We'll probably suspend it but we won't close the book," he added.