

US Marine admits choking transgender after sex, denies murder

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Manila: A United States Marine charged with murder testified in a Philippine court on Monday that he choked a Filipino transgender unconscious after discovering that she had no female organ post-oral sex in a local motel, but stressed that he didn't kill her, according to his lawyer's statement.

Lawyer Rowena Flores said her client, Marine Pfc. Joseph Scott Pemberton, told the court in Olongapo city, northwest of Manila, that Jennifer Laude was unconscious but breathing when he left her in the shower of a motel, where they checked in to have sex after meeting in a bar in October last year. Pemberton panicked after seeing her unconscious and left.

Defense lawyers would present evidence that raises the possibility that someone else killed Laude, according to Flores.

Flores quoted Pemberton as telling the court that he felt he'd been raped.

Flores said defense lawyers would prove Laude was a sex worker who deceived Pemberton, a man she said went to church regularly and had never been involved in a fight until he scuffled with Laude, whose former name was Jeffrey.

Philippine government prosecutors charged Pemberton with murder in December, saying there was "probable cause" that he killed Laude in an attack that "was aggravated by treachery, abuse of superior strength and cruelty." Laude had apparently been strangled and drowned in a toilet bowl.

The case reignited a debate over custody of American military personnel accused of crimes. Washington agreed to move him last year from a US warship to the Philippine military's main camp in metropolitan Manila, where he remained under American custody with an outer ring of Filipino guards.

Activists demanded again on Monday that Pemberton be turned over to Philippine custody, saying the current arrangement "is a continuing affront to our national sovereignty."

Renato Reyes of the left-wing activist group Bayan Muna said Pemberton's admission should pave the way for his conviction, adding the "Laude family deserves nothing less than full and complete justice."

In his testimony, Pemberton recounted how he and fellow Marines descended on Olongapo city, a former liberty town, on October 11 after taking part in joint military exercises with Filipino forces. He narrated how he met two women in a bar who went with him to the motel. One woman left, leaving Pemberton with Laude, Flores said.

While in bed, Pemberton discovered that Laude was a transgender woman and pushed her away, causing her to fall off the bed. Laude allegedly slapped him hard and was about to hit him again, prompting Pemberton to punch Laude, Flores said.

Pemberton choked Laude "only to subdue" her, Flores said, adding that when Laude lost consciousness, he dragged her to the shower to try to revive her. When he saw that she was still breathing, he left, fearing that her companions might return and gang up on him, Flores said.

Marine Lance Cpl. Jairn Michael Rose, who went out with Pemberton that night, acknowledged that the suspect later confided on their ship that he attacked the woman by choking her after discovering that she was transgender when she

undressed, according to the prosecutors.

"I think I killed a he/she," Pemberton was quoted as having told Rose.

But the defense attorney said Pemberton has denied he told Rose that he killed her.

- PTI