

Rapper testifies of alleged arsenal

A Kensington father and sons' case is the first under a law on weapons of mass destruction.

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Relaxed and frequently smiling, gangster rapper Tommy Hill seemed as comfortable yesterday as if the microphone before him were part of a recording studio - not the witness stand.

Hill testified in a high-profile Common Pleas Court trial against a Kensington man and his two sons, who are the first to be charged under Pennsylvania's new law against weapons of mass destruction - a charge that defense attorneys maintain is being misapplied.

Johnnie Bellmon, 61; Harry Bellmon, 41; and Benjamin Bellmon, 30, are accused of amassing an arsenal to protect their alleged marijuana-distribution business.

In a conversational tone, Hill told jurors that a drug war ignited on the 1700 block of North Marshall Street when Benjamin Bellmon moved his marijuana sales onto the block, which had been the turf of a crack dealer.

After Benjamin Bellmon's brother Kimba Haleem, 40, was fatally shot in the house in April 2003, Hill said, Benjamin Bellmon told him he started to stockpile weapons and planned to pack old grenades with gunpowder for revenge.

"He was just kind of setting himself for war. Once they took his brother, it was all-out," Hill testified, looking directly at the jury. "He said he had enough [ammunition] to take an army to war."

Hill, whose real name is John Wilson and who was the lead vocalist of the now-defunct RAM Squad hip-hop group, told jurors he made five records.

"I rap reality rap," Hill explained to the jury.

"So today, you're just rapping reality to the jury," defense attorney Todd Eisenberg asked sarcastically.

"Yes - this *is* reality," Hill responded with smooth confidence.

Yesterday was the first time the 29-year-old Hill had testified for prosecutors since pleading guilty in July to federal cocaine-distribution charges and agreeing to cooperate with authorities.

Defense lawyers for the Bellmons suggested Hill was lying on the witness stand to gain a reduced prison sentence.

But Hill testified that Benjamin Bellmon told him everything when the two shared a jail cell for two months earlier this year.

The pair had known each other from childhood, and Hill testified he once sold marijuana for his friend.

The Bellmons have pleaded not guilty to a host of weapon and drug charges, including possessing weapons of mass destruction and prohibited ammunition, risking a catastrophe, and conspiracy.

If convicted of the weapons of mass destruction charge, which became law after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, each man faces a maximum of 20 years of prison time in addition to the standard sentence.

Defense lawyers for the Bellmons said the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office was misusing an antiterrorism statute to prosecute a simple marijuana case and collectors of vintage military weapons.

Philadelphia defense lawyer Brian McMonagle - who is not connected to the Bellmon case - said yesterday: "The law was enacted to protect against foreign and domestic terrorists... . It would seem to me this statute should apply only in those exceptional cases where mass destruction is contemplated by terrorists. Mass destruction is a lot more than arming yourself in a way that maybe makes you stronger than a rival drug faction."

But State Rep. Harry A. Readshaw (D., Pittsburgh), who sponsored a weapons of mass destruction bill just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, said: "Whether it's a traffic stop or a marijuana raid, if there are weapons considered weapons of mass destruction, it seems to me it would be appropriate."

In the July 2003 raid on the Bellmons' home, investigators seized four loaded handguns, more than 20,000 rounds of live ammunition, an ammunition-making machine, sniper suits designed to blend into vegetation, three grenades from the Korean and Vietnam Wars, an artillery rocket, an inoperable World War II-era machine gun, and disassembled rifles. When police discovered the weapons cache, they evacuated the block.

The Philadelphia District Attorney's Office is pursuing another drug-related weapons of mass destruction case.

Police said they found a grenade, bomb-making equipment, 21 firearms, and a large quantity of crystal methamphetamine during a July drug raid on James Hogeland's home in the 6500 block of Torresdale Avenue.

Hogeland, 42, is scheduled to have a preliminary hearing next month on charges of possessing weapons of mass destruction, risking a catastrophe, and drug offenses.
