Police say woman's hanging was staged

Fernando Cervantes Jr.,
Pam Dankins and Thao Nguyen
USA TODAY

In a new development in the case of a Black Mississippi woman found dead in a tree, authorities said they now believe that Tasia Fortune's hanging was staged and that she was killed at another location.

New details in the case were revealed during a court hearing for Jarques Ratliff, 51, one of four men arrested in connection with the death, according to the Mississippi Clarion Ledger, part of the USA TODAY Network.

Ratliff, who is also Black, was arrested Sept. 11 in Jackson, Mississippi, on a murder charge, Jackson Police Chief RaShall Brackney told reporters Sept. 25. Ratliff appeared in Jackson Municipal Court on Sept. 14, where a judge denied bond after determining he was a flight risk.

Detective Samuel Dukes described Fortune's death as 'staged' due to investigators believing she was killed at another location before her body was placed in a hanging position in the tree. Dukes said authorities determined Fortune was dead for two to three days before her body was discovered.

'With that determination, our investigators moved quickly,' Brackney said of the Mississippi State Medical Examiner's Office's findings. 'That arrest today is an important development in this investigation, but it is not the conclusion.'

Ratliff's attorney, Toney Baldwin, said his client was not involved and that he wanted the 'truth about what happened to come out,' the Clarion Ledger reported.

During the court hearing, investigators referenced an affidavit alleging that Ratliff used 'a black cable cord' to hang Fortune from the tree.

Baldwin said no evidence has been shown at this time presenting a complete picture of what occurred.

'We ask the press and the public not to prejudge until we get the entirety of the evidence,' Baldwin told the Clarion Ledger.

Earnest Lloyd Jr. and Eric Clark have also been arrested in connection with the death. Lloyd was arrested Sept. 22, while Clark turned himself in to authorities on Sept. 25, according to the Mississippi Clarion Ledger.

Fortune, 29, was found dead and hanging from a tree in the backyard of an abandoned house in Jackson on Aug. 3. The discovery of her body was followed by calls for an investigation, including from prominent civil rights attorney Ben Crump.

The case has drawn widespread attention because the circumstances of Fortune's death evoked Mississippi's long history of lynchings and racial violence. Her death also came less than a year after two other highly publicized hanging deaths in the state, including Delta State University student De'Martravion 'Trey' Reed and Cory Zukatis.

'We understand the question and the desire for answers given Mississippi's history,' Brackney said. 'We

do not dismiss those concerns; we are taking them seriously.'

Investigators have also revealed that 'missing illegal narcotics' were central to the crime, with allegations that Fortune had taken them.

Police said Ratliff and Fortune had an 'association' with each other but have not disclosed the nature of their relationship.

Contributing: Michael Loria, USA TODAY

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