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Epstein Accusers 'Robbed' Of Justice Speak Out At Hearing

By **Stewart Bishop**

Law360, New York (August 27, 2019, 7:39 PM EDT) -- A New York federal judge on Tuesday held an unusual hearing on prosecutors' bid to drop sex trafficking charges against the late financier Jeffrey Epstein, who was found dead in jail earlier in August in an apparent suicide, allowing about two dozen of his alleged victims to address the court.

At the packed hearing before U.S. District Judge Richard Berman in Manhattan, which was held to consider a standard motion to drop the case against Epstein following his death, woman after woman rose and said she had been sexually assaulted by Epstein and how her life was impacted. Others penned letters that were read to the court.

Many of the women were identified only as Jane Doe, but others used their real names when describing experiences of abuse by Epstein, which took place when many of the accusers were still minors.

Courtney Wild said Epstein sexually abused her for years and spoke about how she is angry that justice has never been served in this case.

"Jeffrey Epstein robbed myself and other victims of the right to confront him in court, and for that he is a coward," Wild said.

Multiple women described how they were "recruited" as teenagers into Epstein's orbit, often by Epstein confidant Ghislaine Maxwell, lured by claims that the wealthy and well-connected Epstein could help them with their career or education.

One woman who spoke anonymously said Epstein was strategic in how he cultivated his victims, proceeding "carefully, over time," likening the abusive relationship to the fable of the frog being slowly boiled alive.

"At first, I didn't know I was a victim. I had so much self-hatred," the woman said.

Prosecutors in July charged Epstein with conspiracy and sex trafficking, saying that between 2002 and 2005 the financier "enticed and recruited" minor girls as young as 14 to engage in sex acts with him at residences in Manhattan and Palm Beach, Florida, and paid the girls cash.

He had been **detained without bail** in Manhattan's Metropolitan Correctional Center pending trial when he was found unresponsive in his cell early on Aug. 10. New York City's chief medical examiner has **ruled the death a suicide** by hanging.

Some of the accusers urged prosecutors to continue to seek justice by holding Epstein's alleged co-conspirators, including Maxwell and others, to account.

Virginia Roberts Giuffre said she is a victim of both Epstein and Maxwell, who, she said, recruited her just before she turned 17.

"The reckoning must not end. It must continue," Giuffre said. "He did not act alone."

Some of the women also voiced frustration that Epstein has evaded real justice. In 2008, the financier escaped federal charges for similar crimes via a nonprosecution deal and pled guilty to state prostitution charges in Florida, an arrangement that has been criticized as far too lenient. He spent 13 months in jail and was allowed out regularly on work release.

In a letter that was read to the court, Michelle Licata criticized the Florida deal, which she said she was never told about.

"I am still mad, concerned and confused how he committed suicide and escaped justice again," Licata said.

Judge Berman reserved decision on the motion.

The judge defended his decision to hold the hearing in the first place, pushing back against a critical article in the New York Law Journal that suggested he should have simply granted the uncontested motion to drop the charges as opposed to hearing from the women. He said it is the responsibility of courts "to ensure victims are treated fairly and with dignity."

"In my view, a public hearing is the clear vehicle for its resolution," Judge Berman said. "Hearings promote transparency and provide the judge with information they otherwise might not have."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Maurene Comey told Judge Berman that dismissal of the case will in no way inhibit the ongoing investigation of Epstein's co-conspirators or preclude any action by the government to seek civil forfeiture of Epstein's assets.

"This dismissal in no way lessens the government's resolve to stand up for the victims in this case," Comey said.

An attorney for Epstein, Reid Weingarten, used the hearing to urge Judge Berman to conduct or be part of an investigation into the circumstances surrounding Epstein's death. Weingarten noted he was in contact with Epstein around the time of his death and he did not appear to be "a despairing or despondent person."

Martin Weinberg, another of Epstein's lawyers, said an expert forensic medical examiner has said the broken bones in Epstein's neck are more consistent with strangulation. Weinberg also said the timing of the death was odd, given that Epstein's legal team was preparing to file an appeal of the denial of his bail within two days.

Critical surveillance video of the area around Epstein's cell was corrupted, he said.

"It's within your inherent authority to find out what happened to our client," Weinberg said.

Comey countered there is already an **ongoing and active investigation** into Epstein's death by a separate group of prosecutors from the Southern District of New York and FBI agents.

Epstein was represented by Michael C. Miller and Reid Weingarten of Steptoe & Johnson LLP and by Marc Fernich and Martin G. Weinberg.

The government is represented by Alex Rossmiller, Alison Moe and Maurene Comey of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York.

The case is USA v. Epstein, case number 1:19-cr-00490, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York.

--Editing by Amy Rowe.

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