

## Man gets life-plus for tossing daughter to her death

Written by STAFF

Thursday, November 08, 2012 12:18 pm

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NEW BRUNSWICK – Attorney General Jeffrey S. Chiesa has announced that Shamsiddin Abdur-Raheem was sentenced to life in state prison Wednesday, Nov. 7 for throwing his infant daughter from a bridge on the Garden State Parkway into the Raritan River in February 2010.

The baby's body was found on the bank of the river two months later.

Superior Court Judge Bradley J. Ferencz sentenced Abdur-Raheem to life in state prison for the murder of his 3-month-old daughter, Zara, plus an additional 30 years in prison to be served consecutively for kidnapping her. The sentence means that Abdur-Raheem, who is 24, must serve 89 years in prison without possibility of parole.

Abdur-Raheem, officially a Galloway resident, was found guilty by a Middlesex County jury of murder, kidnapping and endangering the welfare of a child on Sept. 7 following a two-week trial in New Brunswick. The jury also found him guilty of two counts of simple assault for attacking the baby's maternal grandmother and striking her with a van when he abducted the baby from the grandmother's apartment in East Orange. Abdur-Raheem was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the child endangerment count, which will run concurrently with the murder and kidnapping sentences, and one year in prison for the two assaults – six months for each – which must be served consecutively to the other sentences. The full sentence is therefore life plus 31 years, with 89 years of parole ineligibility.

Deputy Attorney General Andrew C. Fried tried the case and represented the Division of Criminal Justice at the sentencing.

"This defendant murdered a baby, stealing her away from those who loved her most, ending her innocent life in a horrifying act of violence," Attorney General Chiesa said. "Justice demanded that he receive this sentence, which will keep him in prison for the remainder of his life."

"This prison sentence closes the book on a very tragic case of domestic violence," said Stephen J. Taylor, director of the Division of Criminal Justice. "The guilty verdict secured by our trial attorney was the result of a strong investigation led by the State Police Major Crime Unit and the Division of Criminal Justice, with critical assistance from local and county agencies. I

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commend all involved.”

Under the state’s No Early Release Act, a life sentence is defined as 75 years for purposes of calculating the term of parole ineligibility. Abdur-Raheem must serve 85 percent of that sentence, or 63 3/4 years, without possibility of parole. He must serve an added term of 25 1/2 years of parole ineligibility for the kidnapping under the NERA, for a total of 89 1/4 years without parole.

By its verdict, the jury found that Abdur-Raheem killed his daughter, Zara Malani-Lin Abdur-Raheem, by causing her to fall from the Driscoll Bridge in Woodbridge Township approximately 140 feet into the Raritan River on the afternoon of Feb. 16, 2010. According to the evidence at trial, he pushed or threw her from the front passenger window of his Dodge Caravan, which was parked on the southbound shoulder of the Garden State Parkway.

The infant’s mother, Vanetta Benjamin, had custody of her and had obtained a restraining order against Abdur-Raheem the same day the infant was killed. At the time Zara was abducted, she was in the care of her grandmother, Leno Benjamin, who shared an apartment in East Orange with her daughter and Zara. At about 4 p.m., Abdur-Raheem entered the apartment. The grandmother told Abdur-Raheem to leave, but he grabbed her arm and tried to take the baby. As the grandmother attempted to hold onto the baby, Abdur-Raheem knocked the grandmother down, choked her and banged her head against the floor.

Abdur-Raheem took Zara, but the grandmother, who was 60 at the time, followed him outside and got in front of his vehicle in an attempt to stop him. Abdur-Raheem struck the grandmother with the Dodge Caravan and drove away with the baby. Surveillance video captured Abdur-Raheem running from the apartment with the baby and hitting the grandmother with the van.

After throwing Zara from the bridge, Abdur-Raheem went to Atlantic City to see his imam, his Islamic religious leader, and confessed to him what he had done. The imam drove him to the home of his parents, where he confessed to his parents as well. Abdur-Raheem was arrested that night at his parents’ home in Winslow Township after his father called police shortly after 8 p.m. to report that Abdur-Raheem was at the house and had said that he threw the baby from the bridge. The State Police immediately commenced an intensive search for Zara. After his arrest, Abdur-Raheem gave multiple statements to police, admitting what he had done to his daughter.

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The infant's body remained missing until April 24, 2010 when it was found by surveyors on the south bank of the Raritan River, just east of the Route 35 Victory Bridge. DNA tests confirmed that it was Zara. An autopsy determined that she died from blunt force trauma and drowning.

Abdur-Raheem took the stand during the trial and claimed that Zara appeared to be dead before he tossed her from the bridge. He said she fell to the floor and hit her head when he was tussling with the grandmother. The jury, by its verdict, rejected his defense.

The investigation was conducted by the New Jersey State Police, Division of Criminal Justice, East Orange Police Department, Winslow Township Police Department, Essex County Prosecutor's Office and Middlesex County Prosecutor's Office. Detectives Harry McDermott and Timothy P. Coyle were the lead detectives for the New Jersey State Police Major Crime Unit. Detective Kevin Coleman was the lead detective for the East Orange Police Department. Deputy Attorney General Fried was assisted at trial by those lead detectives, as well as the following members of the trial team from the Division of Criminal Justice: Detective Richard Aitken of the Gangs & Organized Crime Bureau and Deputy Attorney General Jennifer Kmiecik of the Appellate Bureau. Deputy Attorney General Paul Salvatoriello provided early assistance in the investigation.