

# Police: Gunman kills eight in Conn.

By Stephen Singer  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

MANCHESTER, Conn. — A warehouse driver about to lose his job after getting caught on video stealing beer from the distributorship where he worked went on a shooting rampage there Tuesday, killing eight people before committing suicide, authorities said.

At least two people were wounded, one critically, Manchester police said. They were expected to survive.

The gunman, a black man identified by a company executive as Omar Thornton, had complained of racial harassment and said he found a picture of a noose and a racial epithet written on a bathroom wall, the mother of his girlfriend said. Her daughter told her that Thornton's supervisors told him they'd talk to his co-workers. But a union official said Thornton had not filed a complaint of racism to the union or any government agency.

Thornton had been caught on videotape stealing beer from Hartford Distributors and was supposed to meet with company officials when the shootings began. Teamsters official Christopher Roos said.

"It's got nothing to do with race," Roos said. "This is a disgruntled employee who shot a bunch of people."

James Battaglio, a spokesman

for the families who own the distributorship, said he had no immediate information about the allegations of racial harassment.

Thornton's girlfriend had been with him the night before the rampage and had no indication he was planning it, said her mother, Joanne Hannah.

On Tuesday morning, about 50 to 70 people were in the warehouse about 10 miles east of Hartford during a shift change when the gunman opened fire around 7 a.m., said Brett Hollander, whose family owns the distributorship.

Adding to the chaos was a fire at the warehouse that was put out. Police did not know whether the fire was related to the shootings.

After shooting his co-workers, Thornton called his mother, Hannah said.

"He wanted to say goodbye and he loved everybody," Hannah said.

A police sharpshooter had approval to fire on Thornton when he killed himself, an official with knowledge of the scene told the AP on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss it.

Hannah said her daughter Kristi had dated Thornton for the past eight years. She said he was 34 years old.

"Everybody's got a breaking point," Joanne Hannah said. Kristi Hannah did not return calls for comment.

Hannah described Thornton as an easygoing guy who liked to play sports and video games. She said he had a pistol permit and had planned to teach her daughter how to use a gun.

Thornton didn't file any complaints against the company with the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, and there's no record of any other complaints against the firm, the agency said Tuesday.

Hollander's cousin, who's a vice president at the company, was shot in the arm and the face. Hollander said he thought his cousin would be OK.

"There was a guy that was supposed to, was asked to resign, to come in to resign and chose not to and shot my cousin and my co-workers," Hollander said.

The Hartford Courant identified another victim as Victor James, 59, of Windsor.

The rampage was the nation's deadliest since 13 people were fatally shot at Fort Hood, Texas, last November.

And in Connecticut, a state lottery worker gunned down four supervisors in 1998 before committing suicide, and six people were killed in 1974 in botched robbery at a bakery in New Britain.

Two men were convicted of that crime.

On Tuesday, a few dozen relatives and friends of the victims gathered a few miles away at



Jim Michaud/Journal Inquirer

Employees console each other outside of Hartford Distributors in Conn.

Manchester High School. Outside, people talked, hugged and cried. Employees talked on cell phones.

Police officers from numerous agencies and police and fire vehicles surrounded the warehouse, on a tree-lined road in an industrial park just west of a shopping mall.

The Hollander family is widely respected in Manchester, said state Rep. Ryan Barry, a lifelong resident. He said the family-owned Hartford Distributors sponsors local sports teams and the family is civic-minded.

"Everybody knows the Hollanders as good, generous, upstanding people," Barry said. "They're embedded in the community. Everyone knows Hartford Distributors. They treat their employees very well and they're part of the fabric of the town."

In a statement, Connecticut Gov. M. Jodi Rell offered condolences to the victims' families and co-workers.

"We are all left asking the same questions: How could someone do this? Why did they do this?" she said.

## Panel OKs Islam center

By Beth Fouhy and Karen Matthews  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITERS

NEW YORK — A city panel Tuesday cleared the way for the construction near ground zero of a mosque that has caused a political uproar over religious freedom and Sept. 11 even as opponents vowed to press their case in court.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission voted unanimously to deny landmark status to a building two blocks from the World Trade Center site that developers want to tear down and convert into an Islamic community center and mosque.

The panel said the 152-year-old lower Manhattan building isn't distinctive enough to be considered a landmark.

The decision drew praise from Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who stepped before cameras on Governor's Island with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop shortly after the panel voted and called the mosque project a key test of Americans' commitment to religious freedom.

"The World Trade Center site will forever hold a special place in our city, in our hearts," said Bloomberg, a Republican turned independent. "But we would be untrue to the best part of ourselves, and who we are as New Yorkers and Americans, if we said no to a mosque in lower Manhattan."

The vote was a setback for opponents of the mosque, who say it disrespects the memory of those killed at the hands of Islamic terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001. Jeers and shouts of "Shame on you" could be heard after the panel's vote.

The American Center for Law and Justice, a known conservative advocacy group founded by the Rev. Pat Robertson, announced it would challenge the panel's decision in state court Wednesday.

ACLJ attorney Brett Joshpe said the group would file a petition alleging that the landmarks panel "acted arbitrarily and abused its discretion."

The proposed mosque has emerged as a national political issue, with prominent Republicans from former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich lining up against it.

The Anti-Defamation League, the nation's most prominent Jewish civil rights group, known for advocating religious freedom, shocked many groups when it spoke out against the mosque last week.

The League said building the Islamic center "in the shadow of the World Trade Center will cause some victims more pain — unnecessarily — and that is not right."

Bloomberg said Tuesday that denying religious freedom to Muslims would play into terrorists' hands.

He said firefighters and other first responders who died in the Sept. 11 attacks had done so to protect the U.S. Constitution.

"In rushing into those burning buildings, not one asked, 'What god do you pray to? What beliefs do you hold?'" Bloomberg



Seth Wenig/Associated Press

Mayor Bloomberg greets the crowd before his speech.

said of the first responders. "We do not honor their lives by denying the very constitutional rights they died protecting."

Former Rep. Rick Lazio, a Republican running for governor of New York, attended the commission meeting with a handful of opponents to the mosque, which is being developed by a group called the Cordoba Initiative.

"This is not about religion," Lazio said. "It's about this particular mosque called the Cordoba Mosque, it's about it being at ground zero, it's about it being spearheaded by an imam who has associated himself with radical Islamic causes and has made comments that should chill every single American, frankly."

Lazio said the group's imam, Feisal Abdul Rauf, had refused to call the Palestinian group Hamas a terrorist organization.

Rauf also said in a "60 Minutes" interview televised shortly after Sept. 11 that "United States policies were an accessory to the crime that happened."

The Cordoba Initiative says on its website that its goal is to foster a better relationship between the Muslim world and the West, "steering the world back to the course of mutual recognition and respect and away from heightened tensions."

"We believe it will be a place where the counter-momentum against extremism will begin," the imam's wife, Daisy Khan, told The Associated Press Friday. "We are committed to peace."

Khan told The Wall Street Journal that the center's board will include members of other religions and will explore including an interfaith chapel at the center.

The commission's decision not to designate the existing building as a landmark means that the developers can tear it down and start from scratch. If the building had been declared a landmark, they could have created a smaller mosque and community center there. A partner in the project, SoHo Properties, bought the property for nearly \$5 million. Early plans call for a 13-story, \$100 million Islamic center. Cordoba wants to transform the building into a glass tower with a swimming pool, basketball court, auditorium and culinary school besides the mosque.

The center, called Park51, also would have a library, art studios and meditation rooms.

## BP begins 'static kill'

By Greg Bluestein and Harry R. Weber  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITERS

ON THE GULF OF MEXICO — BP embarked Tuesday on an operation that could seal the biggest offshore oil leak in U.S. history once and for all, forcing mud down the throat of its blown-out well in a tactic known variously as "bullheading" or a "static kill."

The pressure in the well dropped quickly in the first 90 minutes of the procedure, a sign that everything was going as planned, wellsite leader Bobby Bolton told The Associated Press aboard the Q4000, the vessel being used to pump in the mud.

He said the work could be complete by Tuesday night or Wednesday, though BP said the effort could continue through Thursday, and engineers won't know for more than a week if it choked the well for good.

The 122 crew members on the Q4000 were excited about being part of what could be the final resolution to a drama that started with the April 20 explosion on the offshore drilling rig Deepwater Horizon, Capt. Keith Schultz said.

"I'm a mariner and we lost mariners out

here," said Schultz, who is on his second 28-day tour of duty since the spill started. "I'm very confident we'll be able to kill this well. It's been one magical time trying to get this thing plugged."

A 75-ton cap placed on the well in July has been keeping the oil bottled up inside over the past three weeks, but that is considered only a temporary measure. BP and the Coast Guard want to plug up the hole more securely with a column of heavy drilling mud and cement.

The static kill involves slowly pumping mud down lines running from a ship to the top of the ruptured well a mile below. BP said that may be enough by itself to seal the well.

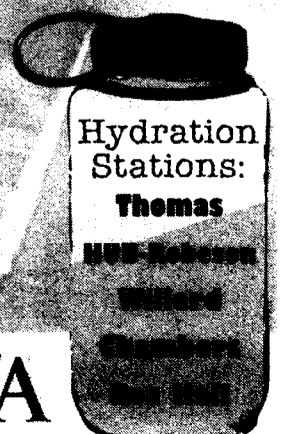
But retired Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the government's point man for the spill, made it clear that to be safe, the gusher will have to be plugged up from two directions.

He said the 18,000-foot relief well that BP has been drilling over the past three months will be used later this month to execute a "bottom kill," in which mud and cement will be injected into the bedrock 2 1/2 miles below sea floor, which should ultimately plug up the well for good.

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