

FLORIDA SCHOOL GUNMAN TRAINED BY WHITE SUPREMACISTS

PARKLAND—Florida shooting suspect Nikolas Cruz was a member of a white supremacist group and had taken part in military-style training exercises, the rights group Anti-Defamation League (ADL) said on Thursday.

Jordan Jereb, believed to lead the shadowy Republic of Florida (ROF) group, told ADL that Cruz had been "brought up" by a member of the group and joined its training exercises near Tallahassee, Florida.

ROF describes itself on its website as a "white civil rights organization fighting for white identitarian politics" and advocating the creation of a "white ethnostate" in Florida. The ADL said the group "borrows paramilitary concepts from the antigovernment extremist militia movement."

Cruz is charged with the premeditated murder of 17 students and adults on Wednesday at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. More than a dozen other people were injured in the shooting spree.

The troubled teen has confessed to gunning down the victims at his former high school, court documents showed on Thursday. He appeared via video link before a judge who ordered him held without bond.

After being read his legal rights, "Cruz stated that he was the gunman who entered the school campus armed with a AR-15 [rifle] and began shooting stu-

dents that he saw in the hallways and on the school grounds," court documents showed.

Crime timeline

Cruz arrived at the school in an Uber at 2:19 p.m., authorities said. Less than three minutes later, he started spraying multiple classrooms with bullets. At 2:28 p.m., he left the campus, according to an official timeline.

He told police that he discarded his tactical gear and rifle, which he bought legally in Florida, in order to blend in with the crowd so he could flee.

He stopped at a Wal-Mart and then McDonald's. He was detained 40 minutes later, after police identified him using school security camera footage.

Expelled from school for disciplinary reasons, Cruz was known to be fixated on firearms and had reportedly been identified as a potential threat to his classmates. Fellow students knew he posted violent messages online.

In an interview with the Daily Beast, Jereb said Cruz "seemed like just a normal, disenfranchised, young white man." "I don't know precisely what he believes ... I know he knew full well he was joining a white separatist paramilitary protofascist organization."

Cruz, Jereb added, was a member of its "cell" in Clearwater, Florida, about 300 kilometers northwest of Parkland, and had trained with them.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation admitted it had received a tip-off about the teenage gunman yet failed to stop him.

Trump mum on gun curbs

President Donald Trump vowed on Thursday to make mental health a priority after the campus carnage, while avoiding any mention of gun curbs to stem America's scourge of mass shootings.

Announcing plans to travel to Florida to meet members of the shocked community, Trump delivered a somber televised address in response to the 18th school shooting to hit the country this year, a terrifying pattern that US authorities have appeared powerless to stop.

"My fellow Americans, today I speak to a nation in grief," said Trump, calling on his fellow citizens to "come together as one nation" and "answer hate with love, answer cruelty with kindness."

But the president avoided all mention of the politically fraught issue of gun control, vowing instead to "tackle the difficult issue of mental health."

Trump had weighed in on the tragedy earlier on Thursday by pointing to "so many signs" the shooter was "mentally disturbed."

"Neighbors and classmates knew he was a big problem. Must always report such instances to authorities, again and again!" he tweeted. —AFP