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NATION

Officials: Chauvin was ready to plead to 3rd-degree murder

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MINNEAPOLIS — Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin was prepared to plead guilty to third-degree murder in George Floyd's death before then-Attorney General William Barr personally blocked the plea deal last year, officials said.

The deal would have averted any potential federal charges, including a civil rights offense, as part of an effort to quickly resolve the case to avoid more protests after protests and riots damaged a swath of south Minneapolis, according to two law enforcement officials with direct knowledge of the talks. The officials spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the talks.

Barr rejected the deal in part because he felt it was too soon as the investigation into Floyd's death was still in its relative infancy, the officials said.

That Chauvin had been in plea talks has been previously reported, and those talks appear to have delayed a May 28 news conference called by the U.S. attorney in Minneapolis for nearly two hours as they were ongoing. But the detail on Chauvin agreeing to plead guilty to a specific charge are new and was first reported late Wednesday by The New York Times.

Floyd, a Black man who was in handcuffs at the time, died May 25 after the white officer knelt on his neck for a number of minutes even as Floyd cried out that he couldn't breathe. Widely seen bystander video sparked protests in the city, including violence, arson and theft, and quickly spread around the country.

Chauvin was fired soon after Floyd's death. He is scheduled for trial March 8 on charges including second-degree murder and manslaughter. Three other officers at the scene, also since fired, are scheduled for trial later this year.

Tom Kelly, Chauvin's attorney at the time of the plea talks, said Thursday he could not discuss the case. Chauvin is now represented by Eric Nelson, who declined comment. A spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office declined to comment.

Separately, the judge handling Chauvin's case on Thursday declined a prosecution request to reinstate a third-degree murder charge.

Prosecutors argued that a recent Minnesota Court of Appeals decision upholding a third-degree murder conviction for Mohamed Noor, a Minneapolis officer convicted in the 2017 shooting death of an unarmed 911 caller, established precedent that supported reinstatement. Judge Peter Cahill ruled that the Noor ruling won't have the power of precedent until further proceedings before the state Supreme Court.

Associated Press writer Mike Balsamo contributed from Washington.