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Assassins and their employers

By Fred Rosen/The Herald Mexico

El Universal

Lunes 16 de abril de 2007

According to the calculations made by El Universal reporters who cover the illicit drug trade, the number of drug-related assassinations in Mexico stands at somewhere between 700 and 750 for 2007. That's about seven a day, up from six a day in 2006. Virtually all the assassins have been paid professionals. The victims have been drawn from a more varied population.

This past February 6, a group of hit men killed five police officers and two secretaries at a police station in Acapulco. At least some of the slain policemen were widely believed to have had links to one of Acapulco's drug-trafficking groups.

Last week, a video appeared on YouTube showing the informal interrogation of one of the alleged assassins. The on-camera victim, bound and repeatedly beaten, finally, in honesty or desperation, admitted to his participation in the killings. The video, a professional object lesson, then shows him strangled and beheaded.

But alleged hit men and rival cartel members are not the only victims of the paid killers. Among the targets of professional assassination in Mexico, three groups stand out: members and employees of rival groups of traffickers, journalists covering a broad variety of sensitive issues (including the inter-cartel violence), and political activists defending the rights of the poor and/or powerless, typically having nothing whatever to do with the drug trade.

It has become common to remark that Mexico has become a dangerous place to be a reporter. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH in Spanish), for example, has been pressuring the Mexican government to more intensively investigate the murder of television reporter Amado Ramírez last week in Acapulco. Ramírez, a correspondent for the Televisa network, was shot to death as he left the network's Acapulco studios after finishing his program.

A few days after the killing, two of the presumed assassins turned themselves in to the Federal Preventative Police (PFP), explaining that they were being pursued by an armed group intent on killing them. It seems that the story of the killing of a prominent journalist had ratcheted up the pressure on police officials to capture not only the hands-on killers but the intellectual authors of the killing as well. The situation had gotten so hot, the two men told their federal interrogators, that their own employers were out to eliminate them.

Professional killers, of course, can be hired for a number of purposes, including the assassination and intimidation of political activists. In a press conference last week, the presiding officer of the CIDH, Florentín Meléndez, warned of the growing number of attacks against human rights activists — including executions, disappearances, beatings, threats and defamation campaigns — in Mexico and other "democratic" countries of Latin America. He urged the region's governments to take immediate action to protect the lives of those who defend controversial causes.

A recent case that illustrates the CIDH concern is the April 9th murder of Santiago Rafael Cruz, an organizer for the U.S.-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), an AFL/CIO-affiliated group that organizes and defends the rights of Mexican "guest-workers" in rural areas of the United States. Cruz, who had been an organizer in North Carolina, was found bound and beaten to death at the group's Mexican headquarters in Monterrey.

Cruz had recently been hired to manage the Monterrey office, and was apparently staying overnight while looking for a permanent place to live. The office, next door to the U.S. Consulate, was set up two years ago to help U.S.-bound temporary workers process their visas and to teach prospective guest-workers their rights and obligations under the law. It has apparently been broken into and vandalized many times.

The FLOC website suggests why the group may have made powerful enemies, especially in the United States. "Our immediate constituency is migrant workers in the agricultural industry," reads the description of the group's mission, "but we are also involved with immigrant workers, Latinos, our local communities, and national and international coalitions concerned with justice. The FLOC vision emphasizes human rights as the standard and self-determination as the process for achieving these rights. We struggle for full justice for those who have been marginalized and exploited for the benefit of others, and we have sought to change the structures of society to enable these people a direct voice in their own conditions."

A spokeswoman for the group told the press that FLOC has suffered repeated harassment in both the United States and Mexico, including several office break-ins and burglaries. "Now," she added, "the attacks have come to this."

Given the thriving industry of professional violence in Mexico, the question may not come down to who beat Cruz to death, but who ordered and paid for the killing.

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