

Informant in Mexican drug war freed from NY jail

By CAROLYN THOMPSON (AP) – April 10, 2010

BUFFALO, N.Y. — A former Mexican police officer who became a drug informant for the United States has been freed from federal detention after fending off government efforts to deport him.

A Justice Department immigration board last month ruled Guillermo "Lalo" Ramirez Peyro should not be returned to Mexico because he would be tortured "either directly by government agents or indirectly by government agents turning him over to the cartel."

Ramirez, who had been in custody for nearly six years, was released late Thursday from a federal detention center in Batavia, outside Buffalo, attorney Steven Cohen said.

Cohen had made arrangements for Ramirez to live in western New York while he applied for a green card, saying it would be safer for the informant who helped put 60 violent people behind bars while infiltrating the violent Juarez drug cartel for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Instead, over the lawyer's objections, Ramirez was immediately flown out of state.

"A lot of people want him dead," Cohen said Friday. "He's out; he's free. He's at an address where he's not particularly safe."

Ramirez's career as an informant ended in 2004 after the discovery of a mass grave outside a middle-class Juarez home that became known as the "House of Death." The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said Ramirez had supervised the murder of a Juarez cartel associate and participated in a series of other murders.

Ramirez denies killing anyone but acknowledges being present during killings to maintain his cover. His attorney said that he tried to prevent deaths by informing U.S. authorities when they were to occur but that the U.S. failed to intervene.

"There's very disturbing inaction on their part," said Cohen, who became involved in the case a month ago.

The former head of the DEA office in El Paso, Texas, said Friday that Ramirez's release should not stop investigators from determining whether the Juarez killings could have been prevented. Sandalio Gonzalez raised questions about Ramirez and his ICE handlers in 2004 after two of his agents were targeted by the cartel and had to evacuate Juarez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso.

"This thing should not end just by his release and him fading into the sunset," Gonzalez, who is retired, said by phone from Miami. "I think both the executive branch and the legislative branch of the government have a duty to look into this and not just let it go with his release."

Several years ago, a corpse was found wrapped in a blanket in a park on the border in Juarez. A severed finger was stuffed in his mouth — a traditional punishment for informants — and the business card for the ICE agent who handled Ramirez was taped to the corpse's forehead.

Although Gonzalez referred to Ramirez as a "homicidal maniac informant" in a 2004 letter to ICE, he said he is not concerned by his release.

"At the time that was the view that I held," he said. "I don't believe that's the issue now. The issue now is to determine if there was government wrongdoing."

ICE fired one of Ramirez's handlers, Raul Bencomo, last year. Bencomo, who is trying to get his job back, told the El Paso Times newspaper in July that he was told he was fired in part for his role in the case.

An agency spokesman for the region that includes Buffalo did not respond to telephone and e-mail requests for comment Friday. A law enforcement official with knowledge of the case said not everyone followed the agency's procedures for handling confidential informants.

"There were some choices made on behalf of individuals not to adhere to the requirements that we had in place," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak about the situation.

ICE has since overhauled its guidelines for handling confidential informants.

Last month's ruling from the Justice Department's Board of Immigration Appeals upheld the decisions of a federal immigration judge and an 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling last year that concluded Ramirez was likely to be tortured in Mexico. The ruling cited pervasive corruption "at all but the highest levels of government."

The decision could be reversed, however, if it someday becomes safe for Ramirez to return to Mexico, said Cohen, who credited co-attorney John LaFalce, a former New York congressman, with helping to get the case resolved.

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