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Mexican cartel snitch hoped 'House of Death' acts would keep him safe

BY STEVEN DUDLEY

As part of his job with one of Mexico's most feared drug cartels, Guillermo Eduardo Ramírez-Peyro presided over at least five murders, including one where he held down the victim's legs while a henchman and two police officers bashed his skull with a shovel.

Ramírez-Peyro, a U.S. government informant, tape-recorded the 2003 murder at the so-called "House of Death" in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, providing proof for what he thought would ultimately earn him safe haven in the United States.

But now the former Mexican traffic cop turned drug smuggler is fighting U.S. efforts to deport him to Mexico, where Ramírez-Peyro could meet the same fate as his victims because of his role in the capture of a top lieutenant in the Juarez Cartel.

"Everyone has agreed that [Mr. Ramírez-Peyro] will be tortured and die if he is returned to Mexico," his lawyer, Jodi Goodwin, said during a Minnesota Appeals Court hearing earlier this month. Ramírez-Peyro, who operated out of Juarez and El Paso, Texas, is currently in detention pending deportation proceedings.

Ramírez-Peyro's case is part of a deadly drug war along the U.S.-Mexico border that will top the agenda in talks Thursday between Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Mexican officials.

The drug war has killed about 7,000 Mexicans. At the House of Death, more than a dozen people died in what cartel members called "barbecues."

Ramírez-Peyro's deportation would likely end an investigation into why the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and Department of Justice officials allowed him to continue torturing victims at the House of Death, even though it violated ICE and Department of Justice guidelines on how to handle confidential informants.

"It's got to be the biggest coverup I've ever seen in law enforcement," said Mark Conrad, a former ICE internal affairs investigator who, as part of his private practice, represented three ICE employees who were facing reprimands in this case. "I've never seen anything like it."

Federal officials declined to comment on the case.

Authorities have been trying to deport Ramírez-Peyro since 2005, even though he claims he was promised legal residence in the United States. His lawyer, Goodwin, has said the government seems worried that he can implicate ICE agents in his actions at the House of Death and has argued that the United States is violating the Convention Against Torture if it sends him to Mexico.

But U.S. prosecutor Tiffany Walters Kleinert countered that Ramírez-Peyro needed to prove that the

Mexican government would not prevent his murder.

"There's no question that corruption is a serious concern in Mexico," she stated in court. "[But] Mr. Ramírez has not established that the Mexican government would not take steps to protect him."

Some say the case illustrates that U.S. priorities are aimed at securing prosecutions in the United States at the cost of Mexican lives.

"We're talking about . . . murders that no one has done anything about," said retired Drug Enforcement Administration agent Sandy Gonzalez, the special agent in charge of the DEA's El Paso office when Ramírez-Peyro was an informant.

Ramírez-Peyro started working with the U.S. government in 2000 as a confidential informant for the DEA, ICE, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Secret Service. In four years, he received \$224,650 for his services and helped prosecute at least 50 traffickers, smugglers and hit men, according to U.S. records obtained by The Miami Herald.

ICE used Ramírez-Peyro to target a high-level Juarez Cartel member, Heriberto Santillan-Tabares. Ramírez-Peyro had met Santillan-Tabares in the late 1990s and watched him climb the cartel ladder. By 2003, Ramírez-Peyro was a trusted member of the Santillan-Tabares cell that moved marijuana and cocaine across the Juarez-El Paso border and disposed of rivals and incompetent members of the cartel.

Ramírez-Peyro himself presided over at least five murders, including the one he recorded in August 2003.

"[Ramírez-Peyro] supervised the murder and had minimal participation in the act," one of his ICE handlers wrote in a memo dated Aug. 25, 2003.

After the first murder, Ramírez-Peyro's ICE handlers told bosses in Washington and Mexico City, as well as the U.S. attorney's office in the Western District of Texas, that Ramírez-Peyro was present at the murder.

ICE greenlighted continued use of Ramírez-Peyro, who was also helping the U.S. government with a cigarette smuggling case, according to U.S. affidavits. Over the next several months, Ramírez-Peyro was either present or had knowledge of at least 10 more murders, he told Mexican authorities. And cartel members called Ramírez-Peyro at least three times to meet at the house for a "*carne asada*," or barbecue -- code for the torture, murder and disposal of cartel members who'd erred or enemies who'd been captured.

On two occasions, Ramírez-Peyro provided the murderers or those burying the bodies in the House of Death with quicklime, to accelerate the decomposition of the corpses, he told Mexican authorities in Dallas.

Ramírez-Peyro testified in 2005 that he told ICE murders would take place before they happened. What's more, ICE had authorization to listen to his telephone calls in which Santillan-Tabares and other members of the cartel told him there would be a "*carneasada*."

ICE did not give Mexican authorities the whereabouts of the bodies or provide them access to Ramírez-Peyro until after Santillan-Tabares was in U.S. custody in 2004, presumably because

Mexican policemen were so intimately involved. One of the key hit men was a police captain.

No one has been prosecuted for the House of Death, although ICE agent Raul Bencomo was reportedly fired after spending several years on administrative leave. Bencomo's lawyer would not comment. During an immigration hearing in 2005, a judge noted ``several ICE officials had been transferred to headquarters in Washington as part of a shake-up designed to restore confidence in the agency."

Conrad said some of his ICE clients in the case spoke of "shredded documents" and a "coverup," but he added that he was not at liberty to elaborate given the sensitivity of the case and the fact that these clients are still employed at ICE. Little further evidence has come to light about possible wrongdoing at ICE or the U.S. attorney's office of Western District of Texas.

Santillan-Tabares was captured in El Paso Jan. 15, 2004. He remains jailed on drug-trafficking convictions, but murder charges were dropped. An investigation by ICE and DEA officials has not been made public.

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