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Ex-officer fights deportation, death

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Guillermo Eduardo Ramirez-Peyro, a former Mexican police officer who was paid \$224,000 for information used to convict dozens of high-ranking Mexican narcotics smugglers, is fighting to remain in the United States - and to stay alive.

Suspected in several gang-related killings, Ramirez-Peyro is set to appear Tuesday before the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Minnesota to claim that his assistance in the U.S. drug war should trump his status as an illegal immigrant and that deporting him would amount to a death sentence.

The Justice Department and federal law enforcement officials paid Ramirez-Peyro for information he provided against members of the infamous Juarez Cartel, also known as the Vincente Carillo Fuentes Organization. Deportation would result in his execution in Mexico and prevent a full airing of abuses that occurred while he was on the U.S. payroll, said a former high-ranking Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) official familiar with the case.

"What's mind-boggling is the position that the Department of Justice has taken on a ruling that has been made twice by an immigration judge based on evidence that this guy's life is in danger," said Sandalio "Sandy" Gonzalez, a former special agent in charge at the DEA's field office in El Paso, Texas.

"It seems what the U.S. government is doing is trying to get the guy killed. They know what will happen to him in Mexico, yet they are still trying to do it."

Justice Department spokesman Charles S. Miller said the department could "not comment in that this is an ongoing matter." Officials from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) also did not comment.

Ramirez-Peyro's case has been dubbed the "House of Death" because of his acknowledged involvement in the killings of as many as a dozen people who were tortured and then buried in the yard of a house in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. At the time, Ramirez-Peyro was helping ICE agents build a case against a leader in the Juarez Cartel.

In October 2007, The Washington Times reported on the targeted killings

by the Mexican drug cartel trying to lock down control of lucrative cocaine and marijuana-smuggling routes into the United States. Some U.S. officials were demanding a congressional investigation into the U.S. agents' use of a killer as a paid informant and the failure of federal prosecutors who oversaw the case to stop the killings - even after they learned of the informant's role.

Known by the code designation SA-913-EP, Ramirez-Peyro eventually fingered a top lieutenant in the Juarez gang who had ordered the House of Death killings.

Mr. Gonzalez, who oversaw all DEA policy in Latin America, said most of the deaths could have been prevented if ICE agents had acted on the information Ramirez-Peyro provided.

"He is the key to unraveling what happened," Mr. Gonzalez said. "They are trying to get rid of the main witness. It's so obvious, it's scary."

A February 2004 report by a Joint Assessment Team of ICE and DEA personnel into the killings and Ramirez-Peyro's use as an informant may have some of the answers, although it has never been made public. The report was based on interviews of more than 40 personnel and a review of various files, Steven M. Robertson, a DEA spokesman, told The Times in 2007.

"The only way we're going to know the truth is with a congressional subpoena," said Mr. Gonzalez, who became aware of ICE's use of the informant in 2004 when two of his agents in Juarez were targeted after they had been compromised.

The Justice Department, then led by Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzalez, fought two rulings in favor of Ramirez-Peyro, who has been kept in prison for his protection.

The case, which has been pending in the immigration courts since 2005, went back before the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals last year. This was despite the prior ruling that Ramirez-Peyro should be allowed to stay in the United States under the U.N. Convention Against Torture.

The hearing Tuesday will be the first time the case is being handled by the Obama administration, under Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr.

In 2005, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officer Jack Berger interviewed the informant and found that "Ramirez had a credible fear of the Mexican government," a 2006 petition to the appeals court said. The petition said there was credible testimony to show Ramirez-Peyro "faced a probability of torture by drug traffickers and law enforcement in Mexico if he were forced to return."

The conclusion is based partly on disclosures that the U.S. agents who worked with Ramirez-Peyro were aware of his involvement in the killings and continued to use him as an informant. Documents obtained by The Times show that Ramirez-Peyro "supervised" one of the slayings and knew of or witnessed others.

Ramirez-Peyro worked for ICE while serving as a lieutenant to Heiberto Santillan-Tabares, also known as "El Ingeniero," a chieftain in the Juarez Cartel who ordered the killings. Ramirez-Peyro has acknowledged witnessing two executions, one of which he videotaped. He said he also bought duct tape and lime for body disposal, supervised burials and arranged the use of the house.

His testimony led to the conviction of Santillan-Tabares. In 2004, out of fear that the U.S. government would send him back to Mexico, Ramirez-Peyro asked for asylum.

- Jerry Seper contributed to this report.