

Feud may have triggered Mexican slayings

By Molly Moore
The Washington Post

MEXICO CITY - The execution of 18 people in the Pacific coastal town of Ensenada last week may have been the result of a feud between mid-level traffickers over a drug deal gone bad, according to Mexican law enforcement officials.

Police are investigating allegations that Fermin Castro - who survived the attack in which 18 family members and neighbors were dragged out of bed and shot dead in a pre-dawn massacre last Thursday - was ordered killed by a Mafia money-collector angered when Castro absconded with a drug haul without paying for it, officials said.

The assassinations, whose victims included two infants, six other children and a pregnant woman, stunned Mexican authorities, who said they fear the trend among Mexican drug cartels toward the kind of indiscriminate violence associated with Colombian drug Mafias.

Until the past year, Mexican drug organizations generally were known for targeting individuals for revenge or retribution and usually - though not always - avoiding attacks on uninvolved family members or shoot-outs in public places that could harm innocent bystanders.

But last year, shortly after the death of the country's most powerful drug lord, assassins walked into a

popular restaurant in the border city of Ciudad Juarez across the river from El Paso, Texas, and killed six diners in a spray of bullets intended to kill two drug associates.

Last week's attack on three families that resided in a ranch compound near the coastal town of Ensenada in Baja California about 60 miles south of the U.S. border was the largest Mexican drug-related slaying on record and the first in which entire families were murdered as part of an alleged revenge killing.

"There is a rule among the cartels - the children are never touched," said one Mexican official with many years of experience in observing the country's drug operations. He and other Mexican authorities said they have no explanation for the indiscriminate nature of last week's massacre, in which the victims were lined up against a concrete wall and executed.

Castro reportedly is hospitalized in a coma after receiving bullet wounds to the head. Among those killed were his wife and two-year-old son, and his brother-in-law and wife and their five children.

Mexican authorities have detained 10 men whose weapons generally match those used in the slayings, but have not filed any charges pending the results of ballistics tests.

Although law enforcement authorities from different agencies are

continuing to pursue several lines of investigation, federal drug investigators said they believe that Fermin Castro, 38, was one of the many bajadores, or logisticians, responsible for loading and unloading drug shipments under loose contracts with the Tijuana-based Mafia run by the Arellano Felix family, one of Mexico's two largest drug cartels.

Law enforcement officials said informants have told them that Castro worked for a mid-level "collector," or money man for the cartel, named Ismael Higuera Guerrero and known as "El Mayel." Those informants allege that Castro snared a large load of marijuana without paying Higuera his cut for the shipment.

That scenario parallels the pattern of revenge killings in the Mexican drug underworld in which most victims are murdered for double-crossing or threatening the power structures within cartels rather than because of battles between major Mafias. The murder of drug trafficker Rafael Munoz Talavera in Juarez two weeks ago allegedly was ordered by one of the most powerful leaders of the Juarez Cartel who believed Munoz was attempting to organize a shift in the Mafia's power structure, Mexican authorities said. They dismissed early reports that sought to link the Ensenada slaying and the Munoz execution with a feud between the Juarez and Tijuana cartels.

Switched-Baby support case dismissed

By Patricia Davis
The Washington Post

STANARDSVILLE, Va. - It began seven months ago as a routine domestic-relations case. A mother, Paula Johnson, asked a judge to order her former boyfriend, Carlton Conley, to pay the \$75 a week he had promised to help support their daughter, Callie Marie.

Monday, that judge awarded custody of 3-year-old Callie to Johnson, 31, and set visitation for Conley, 34. But he dismissed the child-support case of Johnson vs. Conley, pointing to what has since become a fact known nationwide: Conley is not Callie's biological father.

"I can't enforce it," Juvenile and Domestic Relations Judge F.W. Somerville told Johnson Monday at a hearing in this picturesque town of 250. "I can't order him to pay child support."

Somerville's ruling brought an anticlimactic end to a child-support case that led to the revelation that Callie was not the daughter of Conley and Johnson but had been swapped with another baby girl just after birth at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville.

The case was played out in newspapers and on television sets across America, as details of the swap emerged. It turned out that Johnson's baby, who became Rebecca Grace Chittum, had been given to a teen-age mother named Whitney Rogers and that the baby Johnson had taken home was actually the daughter of Rogers and her boyfriend, Kevin Chittum.

Rogers and Chittum were killed in a traffic accident in July; they died never knowing that Rebecca was actually Paula Johnson's biological daughter.

The search for Paula Johnson's biological baby began after Somerville ordered genetic tests to determine whether Conley was Callie's father. The tests revealed not only that he was not the father but also that Johnson wasn't Callie's mother. Subsequent testing indicated that Rebecca was Conley and Johnson's daughter.

Somerville cited the initial test results Monday in ruling that he had no legal authority to enforce any child-support payments. Instead, the judge said, Johnson and Conley could enter into a contractual agreement to provide for Callie, a pact that could be enforced through civil courts.

Johnson, whose relationship with Conley has warmed during the past few months, patted him tenderly on the back Monday as they stood close together at the bench. After the court hearing, they wrote out a contract on a piece of yellow paper, which they then had notarized. They both agreed that Conley, a construction worker, would pay \$75 a week to Johnson to help support Callie, she said.

The single mother of four also dropped a petition for a restraining order to keep Conley, who once served time for assaulting her, away from her. She said he had been struggling to make the payments - \$40 here, \$50 there - but that it had been financially difficult for him.

"We're a lot closer," Johnson said

of Conley after the court hearing, noting all that they had been through together. Johnson said they are both trying to forge a relationship with their biological daughter, Rebecca, who is being raised by the parents of Rogers and Chittum. Both families have agreed to keep Callie and Rebecca in their current arrangements and to raise the girls together.

The two families have become one, Johnson said. Rebecca calls Conley, her biological father, "that boy," and calls Johnson "other mommy Paula."

"There's no reason to adopt" Callie, Johnson said. "Nobody is adopting nobody." Johnson said she has not told Callie, who just started preschool, that she is not her biological mother. But Johnson said that she does not prevent Callie from watching television and that the girl's favorite thing to watch has been "my mommy, my daddy and my lawyer."

As their story has played out, Johnson says, it upsets her when she is not referred to as Callie's mother in media reports.

"That is my child," she said in an interview Monday. "That upsets me that people say I'm just raising her. She's my daughter, (and) Rebecca is my daughter."

Johnson said that she saw Rebecca most recently on Sept. 15 and that Rebecca and Callie are just typical, happy 3-year-olds. Conley, who declined to comment Monday, will see Callie twice a week and every other weekend.

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New Queen's reign of power

By Michael Colton
The Washington Post

ATLANTIC CITY - Hours after realizing dream No. 1 by winning the Miss America crown, Nicole Johnson, previously Miss Virginia, realized dream No. 2.

Near the end of the competition, Johnson, who plans to be a journalist, said the person she would most like to interview is Elizabeth Dole, "a woman of integrity." When she finally returned to her hotel Sunday morning to catch two hours of sleep, there was a message: Liddy Dole called; call her back when you get a chance.

These things happen when you're Miss America. Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and her employer, called Sunday morning, too.

But Johnson, 24, is not going to have much time to return the calls. By afternoon she was whisked away to New York, where she was to appear on ABC's "Good Morning America" and "The View" and pick out her traveling wardrobe for the next year from the designers of her choice. Then to California and "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and the start of her whirlwind tour of the country. She's big time now.

Johnson appeared at her first news conference Sunday as Miss America, but it will take some time before the public really discovers who she is. Though the theme of Saturday's pageant was self-expression, only after a winner is crowned can she truly be herself and distinguish her personality from those of all the other good-hearted women. The pressure is off. There are no more judges to impress. The job interview is over. Spontaneity can occur without the prodding of coaches and certified image consultants.

For now, Nicole Johnson of Roanoke, Va., is a typical pageant winner, perky, earnest, likable and conventionally pretty. She's a 5-foot-9, 133-pound brunet with a nice figure and a cute pinch of baby fat under her chin. Not that it matters, of course, because Miss America these days is not a beauty queen but a socially motivated activist. Which is why Johnson refused to put on her crown for the benefit of photographers Sunday morning. "The crown is just a symbol, it's not what Miss America is about," she said.

It's about diabetes, for Johnson.

She's more attached - literally - to her social platform than most Miss America contestants. For the past year Johnson has worn an insulin pump to treat the life-threatening disease, which she has had for five years. "People with diabetes need a role model, a spokesperson, and an advocate to push for legislation for them," she says. Already Johnson has served as the Virginia spokesperson for the National Diabetes Association and lobbied Congress for increased research funding.

Her pump, a small black box called the MiniMed 507C, is attached to a small catheter tube the size of a woman's fingernail. With the help of a needle, she inserts the tube into her hip or her stomach, taking it out only to shower or swim. Or to walk onstage in a turquoise blue bikini, as she did Saturday night.

"I didn't want it to be confusing to the audience and the judges," she says. "Everyone thinks it's a beeper."

During the rest of the pageant the pump was discreetly positioned underneath various gowns, like the black Vera Wang with mock turtle neck she wore during the evening-wear competition. Over the year, she will make her pump more recognizable; during the news conference, she gladly removed it and held it up for photographers.

She also removed the tube for an 8 a.m. romp in the ocean this morning, an annual Miss America tradition.

Johnson was born in Florida but moved to Virginia Beach in 1996 to earn her master's degree in journalism at Regent University. She failed three times to earn the Miss Florida title while studying English at the University of South Florida, but became Miss Virginia on her second try. (She doesn't have a boyfriend, for the record.)

On the religious-journalism front, she's been a writer and producer for "The 700 Club" on the Christian Broadcasting Network, and wrote for a CBN show co-hosted by Terry Meeuwsen, Miss America 1973.

During the pageant, Johnson sang "That's Life" and spoke with co-host Meredith Vieira about feeling denial, depression and anger after her illness was diagnosed. Now, she says, "diabetes is the best thing that ever happened to me," because it's taught her to overcome obstacles.

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River pollution linked to widespread sexual defects in fish

By Marla Cone
Los Angeles Times

In a surprising scientific discovery that suggests pollution is feminizing animals throughout the wild, everyday concentrations of sewage effluent in rivers appear to contain estrogenlike chemicals potent enough to cause fish to be born half-male, half-female.

The finding by British scientists provides strong new evidence that hormone-altering pollution - one of the most troubling and controversial environmental issues of modern times - could be a global ecological threat.

Other recent studies had found scattered populations of animals with bizarre sexual defects living in highly polluted waters, but the new research suggests that the problems are more widespread than previously detected.

The British researchers said they uncovered "very compelling evidence" that sewage treatment plants routinely release hormone-like compounds into rivers that are feminizing "a surprisingly large proportion" of wild fish. The fish were found in eight rivers throughout Great Britain that are considered typical in terms of pollution, so scientists suspect damage to sex hormones is so pervasive that it could be happening in many rivers around the world.

"The incidence and severity of intersexuality ... is both alarming and intriguing," researchers from Brunel University and the British government reported in the September issue of the journal Environmental Science and Technology.

Some male fish have such mixed-up hormones that they are born with ovaries and eggs instead of sperm ducts. In two of the eight rivers down-

stream of sewage treatment plants, 100 percent of the male fish sampled had feminized reproductive tracts, ranging from severe to slight. The other six rivers had rates from 20 percent to 80 percent.

Hundreds of widely used man-made chemicals - including pesticides, industrial compounds, dioxins and ingredients of plastics and detergents - are believed to mimic estrogen or block testosterone, disrupting the endocrine system that is critical to sexual development.

In their report, the scientists called their findings "the first documented example of a widespread sexual disruption in wild populations of any vertebrate." Hormonal havoc, however, has previously been reported in alligators, birds, river otters, carp and other U.S. wildlife in isolated locations.

The phenomenon of "intersex" animals was first discovered in the 1970s, but it was dismissed as a fluke until the early 1990s, when biologists found feminized alligators in a highly polluted Florida lake and began to suspect that man-made chemicals were altering sex hormones.

The British work "is an extremely important study for many reasons," said Theo Colborn, a World Wildlife Fund scientist and activist who was one of the first to notice a pattern of hormonal problems in animals. The sexual damage the researchers found "is pervasive, it's widespread," Colborn said. "That's

Julian Weis, a Rutgers University marine biologist who studies the impact of pollution, said the British research "lends more support to endocrine disruption as being a very serious issue."

Adult animals are unharmed by hormone-imitating pollutants; instead, the damage is inflicted on the next generation. Mothers pass the excessive amounts of estrogen to their embryos or fetuses, which cannot distinguish between fake estrogens and real ones. When this estrogen boost comes during a critical phase of sexual development, genetic signals go haywire and males are born with feminized genitalia or other reproductive problems.

No one knows what threat, if any, these man-made estrogens pose to human health and fertility. Some scientists suspect that men exposed in their mother's womb might have depleted sperm counts that lower their fertility; it also might explain a recent surge in testicular cancer.

Hormones play the same vital sexual role in humans as they do in fish and other animals. Although people are exposed through food and water to the same pollutants as water-inhabiting animals, they encounter much lower doses, so any human effects may be subtle.

One of the most surprising aspects of the British findings is that fish are suffering so many sexual defects in a part of the world with sophisticated environmental laws and technologies. Scientists wonder how minute concentrations of fake hormones in the environment - which are hundreds of times less potent than natural estrogen - could have such a severe impact.

The scientists do not know which chemicals are to blame, since sewage is a mix of wastes from homes and industries - everything that is washed down drains.

The culprits could be anything from the urine of women excreting

artificial hormones from birth control pills, to pesticides or plastics.

"It's really anybody's guess as to what is causing this," said Weis, who serves on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency task force developing a national plan to screen chemicals for hormonal effects.

Evidence is emerging that wildlife is being feminized in waters where modern environmental practices and laws are followed and the ecosystem appears outwardly healthy.

"The rivers we studied are typical rivers in Great Britain and are not particularly known for contamination or industrial dumping," said Brunel biologist Susan Jobling, one of the authors of the fish study.

The reproductive damage might have dire consequences for an ecosystem, because if males are sterile, an entire animal population might gradually be depleted. Fish, in particular, are an important link in the world's food chain.

So far, the fish in the British study - a species called "roaches" - remain abundant, even in the Aire and Nene rivers, where 100 percent of tested males were feminized. Apparently some of the males still have enough of their systems intact to reproduce.

"What we still don't know is if these intersex fish are reproductive or not. That's the bottom line," Weis said. "Some of them have no sperm ducts, so obviously they can't reproduce."

Because females are more critical to reproduction than males, populations can regenerate themselves even if only a few males are fertile. Over the generations, though, if feminization remains unchecked, fisheries could collapse.

Prison officers in abuse case get jobs back

By Mark Gladstone and Mark Arax
Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - A former associate warden and five other high-ranking officers at Corcoran State Prison, disciplined in a highly publicized inmate abuse case, have had their jobs restored with back pay.

A Sacramento Superior Court judge on Friday set aside the discipline that followed the alleged beating of 36 black inmates in 1995, saying prison officials failed to adequately spell out the charges against the officers.

Department of Corrections officials expressed disappointment that the case was thrown out on what they characterized as a technicality and

said they might appeal.

Pam Smith-Steward, the department's chief legal counsel, said Judge Cecily Bond found that the notice of charges filed against the officers "didn't specifically cite" the procedures and regulations they were accused of violating.

According to the department's investigation of the June 21, 1995, incident, shackled inmates were kicked, punched and slammed into walls by dozens of baton-wielding officers as Associate Warden Bruce Farris and other supervisors watched at the prison south of Fresno. The incident occurred as the inmates got off a bus from Calipatria State Prison in the Imperial Valley.

A few inmates suffered broken bones, and two dozen others were

forced to their knees and had their hair shorn.

In December 1996 the State Personnel Board upheld disciplinary actions against the six officers. It agreed with the findings of an administrative law judge who sat through two months of hearings.

But Friday, Bond reversed the demotions of Lt. Robert Dean, Sgt. Reginald Parra and Sgt. John Misko and the 60-day suspension without pay of Lt. Harold McEnroe.

The judge also overturned the dismissal of Farris and the demotion of Lt. Raul Garcia.

Michael Rains, a Walnut Creek attorney who represented most of the officers, said charges against Farris and Garcia involving minor violations were upheld and sent back to the per-

sonnel board for action. Rains could not immediately estimate how much back pay the officers would receive.

The attorney said the officers were carrying out the instructions of former Corcoran Warden George Smith when he ordered the inmates' hair cut if they did not remove their braids.

Rains described the Corrections Department investigation as "a sham and a farce," saying the agency "took the stories of the inmates at face value ... when there was not physical evidence to support their stories."

But Bond's ruling is not likely to quiet the controversy that has surrounded the case for more than three years.