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The 17-year-old son of former Policía Nacional (PN) chief Ricardo Ramírez del Cid and two police bodyguards of the élite Batallón Cobra were gunned down last month by a group of heavily armed assailants.

The surprise attack on Óscar Roberto Ramírez and the two security agents took place the evening of Feb. 18 at a small, middle-class restaurant in Tegucigalpa’s southern suburb of Colonia Lomas de Toncontín, near the Toncontín International Airport.

The teenager and one of the bodyguards were rushed to a hospital, where they died shortly after arrival, and the other policeman as well as another person—all supposedly one of the attackers—died at the restaurant, where approximately six others—several bystanders and two possible attackers—were wounded.

The incident was initially attributed to local mareros (members of maras—youth gangs originally created in the 1980s in the Los Angeles, California, area and operating for decades in this Central American nation and in bordering El Salvador and Guatemala).

Early versions—which were eventually dismissed—said the attackers’ plan was not to kill anyone but to stage a holdup. As the investigation has proceeded, it has been established that the assailants were mareros but, according to different sources, not acting on their own but hired to either kidnap or kill Ramírez del Cid’s son.

Fingers point at the police, including Chief Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, whom Ramírez del Cid has publicly held responsible for the crime, an allegation Bonilla has denied.

Feud among police chiefs

Members of civil-society sectors, who spoke with NotiCen on condition of anonymity, said the clash derives from an ongoing feud between the former police chief and his successor. Those sources said that among the things that might have angered Ramírez del Cid is that Bonilla’s appointment was made over other possible candidates with more seniority than El Tigre. They also said that the clash reveals tensions and strong rivalry within the high-ranking police.

The former head of the much-criticized PN had been sworn in on Oct. 31, 2011, replacing José Luis Muñoz, who had been sacked in the midst of a major PN shakeup after a scandal caused by the release of four police officers who were suspects in the murder of two university students—one the son of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) rector Julieta Castellanos (NotiCen, Dec. 15, 2011).
During Ramírez del Cid's brief tenure, civil-society sectors strongly criticized him, mainly because of the unsolved murder of former police advisor and anti-drug expert Alfredo Landaverde, then head of the Comisión de Lucha contra el Narcofáctico, who was gunned down in downtown Tegucigalpa.

However, the event that actually brought down Ramírez del Cid was the killing of a well-known local radio journalist. Alfredo Villatoro, who conducted the early morning, four-hour newscast Diario Matutino on Radio HRN and headed the station’s news department, was abducted May 9, 2012, and found six days later in one of Tegucigalpa's residential sectors—the southern Residencial Las Uvas—with two bullets in his head, his face covered with a piece of red cloth, and dressed in a Cobra uniform (NotiCen, June 14, 2012).

On May 21, 2012, after barely six months in office, Ramírez del Cid was replaced by Bonilla during a swearing-in ceremony headed by Honduran President Porfirio Lobo at the Casa Presidencial. Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla then told local media the new police chief had been chosen based on "his career record, his high professional level, and his hard work."

About Ramírez del Cid’s removal, the minister said, "The PN is a professional institution based upon what the law says," and the force's members "are the citizens' servants, and that’s what the police are going to continue to do."

But human rights organizations point to El Tigre Bonilla, who has served in northwestern and western Honduras, as having committed human rights violations, including "social cleansing." The local morning newspaper El Heraldo said, "This was in 2002, when the group Los Magníficos surfaced, made up of former police." Bonilla was tried, the paper said, but "he was not found responsible and was released on bail."

Among the first to describe the killing of Ramírez del Cid’s son as the work of mareros was Danilo Orellana, former director of Centros Penales—the Honduran prison system. "It’s a gang problem because the gang issue has not been worked on by the police, so gangs should be focused on," he said.

But three days after the crime, El Heraldo printed a different version. "El Heraldo had access to data indicating that in the death of young Ramírez three persons are involved who remain jailed inside the Penitenciaría Nacional [Honduras’ major prison facility]," said the daily. "Another source linked to intelligence bodies confirmed the investigation has now extended to the Penitenciaría Nacional, based on information about inmates having taken part in the planning and execution of the criminal action."

"However, Secretaría de Seguridad spokesperson Héctor Iván Mejía said there are several theories around the criminal action," said the story in El Heraldo. "Mejía was asked whether it had been confirmed that the fourth casualty was a part of the group of criminals, and he answered that ‘apparently he’s a member of a gang, there’s some important data there to be acknowledged in his personal history, and that’s the starting point to define well the group…and how it operates and the places and other operations they’ve worked on.’"

The newspaper also reported that after the incident "both Vice Minister of Security Coralía Rivera [and ex-police chief] and former director of Centros Penales Danilo Orellana stated that the crime had been committed by gang members. This version was issued because it was said that the bloody attack had been carried out by a sector inside the police institution."
Shooting was not accidental

Four days after his son’s murder, Ramírez del Cid said that the version about a holdup and accidental shooting is out of the question and that the way the incident occurred points to an operation aimed at the victim.

El Heraldo then reported that investigators it had interviewed "revealed that holdups to middle-class restaurants are not carried out by 10 or more individuals, that for such holdups only two or three people are needed, who are not usually heavily armed, and that robbers do not arrive in two or more vehicles to stage a holdup in businesses where cash flow could be barely 10,000 to 15,000 lempiras [some US$500 to US$750]."

The former police chief also publicly said that, four days before the crime, he received official notice that the 24 police bodyguards and the vehicles that were part of his personal security were reduced by half, because "they tried to weaken me, or they actually weakened me," and he added that "family must be respected."

On Feb. 23, Ramírez del Cid told the program Frente a frente, on TV Channel 5, that Bonilla was the main suspect in the case.

"To me, the main suspect is Juan Carlos Bonilla, because he was in the area and he told me this at the funeral….He even said that he had gone past the place [the restaurant] and that he wanted to have some chicken, but saw it closed and went away," said Ramírez del Cid. "But I knew he had been at the [nearby gas station] Esso América, and I have witnesses. There’s a need to know who he met with, who he was with all that time."

"Patrol 101 was in the area, we know that from the police, but this patrol doesn’t arrive at the place where the shots occurred, it wants to but it doesn’t arrive because there are two individuals who delay it, they show Ministerio Público badges and they’re not from the MP. All this has to be investigated," Ramírez del Cid pointed out.

Ramírez del Cid also said that, when Bonilla arrived at the funeral, "my friends weren’t going to let him be there, and had I told them to tie him down, they would’ve tied him down, right then and there, but we weren’t going to do that because we want to do things transparently and legally… to get this over with once and for all." He also told Channel 5 that Bonilla has ordered transfers of police officials "including the head of investigation and put his own people there…to erase all evidence."

Five days later, Bonilla denied Ramirez del Cid’s allegations and told reporters that "all my life I’ve been a man respectful of people, of society, and I only ask the divine creator of the universe to give him [Ramírez del Cid] the wisdom to allow the Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal [DNIC] and the Ministerio Público…to prove the truth or to call to order those really responsible for what happened. We strongly dismiss what’s being implied. At the same time, I want to say that I regret the moment he might be going through."

On Ramírez del Cid’s allegation that he was in the area at the time of the murder, Bonilla said, "It’s because I live in the area. I go through there. The place where I’m at is a gas station I’ve been visiting for years….The place where Gen. Ramírez del Cid’s son died is on the street I go down every
day. There are people, there are cameras inside the place that can provide proof. I strongly reject all that's being said, and justice will show who those responsible are."

-- End --