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Apparent Suicide of Argentine Businessman Linked to Journalist's Death

by LADB Staff

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Nearly 16 months after well-known Argentine photojournalist Jose Luis Cabezas was killed in the exclusive beach resort of Pinamar and his car set on fire with his handcuffed body inside, an arrest warrant was issued for Alfredo Yabran in connection with the case. Yabran, one of Argentina's wealthiest men, was the suspected intellectual author of the killing. Just as police were closing in on Yabran, he apparently committed suicide. His death will have significant political repercussions, especially within the governing Partido Justicialista-peronista (PJ).

Police said Yabran, 52, shot himself in the mouth. Officers found his body in a country home in the northeastern province of Entre Rios. Police said they were about to enter a locked bedroom when they heard a gunshot inside and found Yabran's body alone in the room.

The 35-year-old Cabezas was killed during the night of Jan. 25, 1997, in the Pinamar resort 350 km south of Buenos Aires. He worked for the magazine Noticias. Cabezas and the magazine were investigating Yabran's business dealings as well as police corruption, and Cabezas took the first photos of Yabran, which Noticias published shortly before the journalist was killed.

"The murder of Cabezas had an exponential number of consequences," said Juan Pablo Cafiero, a member of a congressional anti-corruption commission. "This crime revealed the weakness of the political and justice systems, the crisis of impunity in Argentina. The nation has to resolve its problems with the security forces and build a credible justice system."

Cafiero and other opposition politicians accused Yabran of being an organized-crime boss who controlled postal services, airports, government officials, and private security companies that employ notorious military and law-enforcement veterans of the dirty war. Such accusations first surfaced from former economy minister Domingo Cavallo who said the business magnate was the leader of a "mafia" with close ties to the administration (see NotiSur, 04/04/97).

But the ruling-party majority on the anti-corruption commission issued a report last November, despite opposition dissent, that found insufficient proof that Yabran used Mafia-style tactics to build a secretive business empire. Almost from the beginning, Yabran was suspected of having played a role in Cabezas' death, although his political connections to President Carlos Saul Menem's administration and his powerful financial ties to the government appeared to shield him (see NotiSur, 10/31/97). Several arrests were made during the past year, including members of the Buenos Aires police and Yabran's security chief, but little progress was evident in naming the intellectual author.

Accusations of a cover-up continued. National and international press associations used the Cabezas case as an example of the dangers faced in Latin America by investigative reporters and the impunity enjoyed by their killers. Suspect's former wife cracks shield around Yabran The break in the case came May 15 when Silvia Belawsky, ex-wife of Gustavo Prellezo charged with committing the murder testified before Judge Jose Macchi that Prellezo confessed to her in March 1997 that Yabran had ordered Cabezas killed. He told her that Yabran was angry that Cabezas followed him and took photographs of him. Both Belawsky and Prellezo are in jail, as are four civilians, three other former Buenos Aires police officers, and Gregorio Rios, a former soldier who was Yabran's security chief.

Following Belawsky's testimony, Judge Macchi issued the arrest warrant and asked for cooperation from Interpol in case Yabran fled the country. Yabran had maintained his innocence in Cabezas' death and said he was caught in the political rivalry between Menem and Buenos Aires governor Eduardo Duhalde. A spokesperson for Yabran said the multimillionaire would not turn himself in because he feared becoming a "victim" of the Buenos Aires police. The Supreme Court was set to rule whether the federal or provincial authorities had jurisdiction in the case. Yabran's lawyers wanted the matter handled in federal court, rather than by Judge Macchi, considered close to Duhalde. Administration distances itself from Yabran Before Yabran's death, an editorial in the daily La Nacion said, "The Yabran case has extremely serious institutional implications given that members of the three branches of government are strongly suspected of providing protection to the businessman in question."

On May 18, Defense Minister Jorge Dominguez said the government would not protect Yabran, and said the judiciary "is acting with all seriousness and without interference from the executive." All day the government repeated the same theme: that Yabran's case had nothing to do with the administration and there was never any relation between Yabran and Menem. Few government officials were willing to comment on the record, but many said privately that Yabran's going into hiding could be politically costly to the administration.

For Duhalde who wants to replace Menem as president following the 1999 elections solving the Cabezas murder, which occurred in his province, has been considered essential. The opposition Alianza the coalition of the Frente Pais Solidario (FREPASO) and the Union Civica Radical (UCR) accused the government of protecting Yabran before and after the arrest order, and they called for a motion to censure Minister Rodriguez for receiving Yabran.

On May 19, Menem lashed out at those who accused the administration of protecting Yabran. "They want to make it a political matter," said Menem. "Those who would give this a political treatment to obtain some kind of electoral advantage are really wretches." Menem immediately met with his closest advisors after learning of Yabran's death, although presidential spokespersons insisted the meeting was not related to Yabran. Despite official statements confirming the death was a suicide, calls for an investigation began immediately.

Cavallo was among the first to insist that the death be investigated as well as all those in the government implicated in protecting Yabran. Press reports questioned official statements regarding the death, and the court ordered that the body not be cremated. Political observers will be following

closely the aftermath of Yabran's death for any politically damaging evidence that Yabran took to the grave that might come to light. [Sources: The Los Angeles Times, 01/27/98; CNN, 05/16/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 05/17/98; Notimex, 05/16/98, 05/18/98, 05/20/98; Associated Press, 05/16/98, 05/20/98; Clarin (Argentina), 04/23/98, 05/12/98, 05/16/98, 05/18/98, 05/19/98, 05/21/98; Spanish news service EFE, 05/16/98, 05/18/98, 05/19/98, 05/21/98; The Miami Herald, 05/21/98; Pagina 12 (Argentina), 05/19/98, 05/21/98, 05/22/98]

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