

Death sentences imposed in deadly kidnap-for-ransom scheme

by Matt Krasnowski

LOS ANGELES - A federal judge on Monday ordered death sentences for two men who headed a vicious kidnapping-for-ransom scheme in which five people were killed and their bodies were dumped in a Northern California reservoir.

Lithuanian immigrant Jurijus Kadamovas, 40, and Iouri Mikhel, 41, a native of Russia, are the first people to have their executions ordered in Los Angeles federal court in more than 50 years. Last month, a jury quickly decided that death was the proper punishment for the pair.

"Justice is done," said Ruven Umansky, whose son Alexander Umansky, 35, was killed in the ransom scheme.

Mikhel and Kadamovas, who prosecutors alleged had Russian organized crime links, led a group that made a business out of abducting wealthy individuals for cash. In late 2001 and early 2002, the group nabbed five victims - most of them Russian immigrants - from the Los Angeles area and demanded money from their families and associates, prosecutors said.

Besides Umansky, who owned a car audio business, the other victims were home builder Meyer Muscatel, 54, the only U.S. native; financial consultant Rita Pekler, 39; former banker George Safiev, 37; and his assistant in a movie company, Nick Kharabadze, 29.

The bodies of all five victims were dumped in the New Melones Reservoir near Yosemite National Park.

In some cases, Mikhel and Kadamovas continued to demand money even after the victims died. Prosecutors alleged that the group amassed \$1.2 million in connection with three of the abductions.

Although it was not allowed at trial, prosecutors have alleged that Mikhel and Kadamovas were involved in two abductions and slayings of two Russian businessmen in Cyprus and Turkey.

During Mikhel's hearing Monday, U.S. District Judge Dickran Tevrizian said prosecutors not only proved that he was guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt, they proved it beyond all possible doubt."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Dugdale called Mikhel a "uniquely dangerous man" who has repeatedly tried to break out of jail. It was also revealed that he attempted suicide three times behind bars.

Appeals of the death sentences are automatic.

Another defendant charged in the scheme is currently on trial. Petro Krylov, 34, also faces the death penalty if convicted.

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