

News report alleges city police linked to drug cartel

by Anna Cearley - CNS

SAN DIEGO - As Mexican police held a memorial service Tuesday for two officers gunned down in Tijuana last weekend, city law enforcement officials downplayed a news report alleging a connection between drug traffickers and city police.

The allegations surfaced just days before Sunday's fiercely contested gubernatorial election, in which Tijuana's former mayor, Jorge Hank Rhon, a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), is running against National Action Party (PAN) candidate JoseÃ• Guadalupe Osuna Millan.

While Tijuana police fall under the PRI administration, state and federal law enforcement forces are run by governments aligned with the PAN.

The two officers, who worked for state and federal forces, were attacked Saturday after they detained a man and his female companion.

Reforma, a Mexico City-based newspaper, reported Tuesday that the man, Cuauhtemoc Lopez Corral, is a suspected member of the Arellano Felix drug cartel. According to the report, based on government files obtained through sources, Lopez collaborated with city police in a 2006 attack in which a federal agent was killed in Tijuana. The government files included alleged conversations between Tijuana police and suspected cartel members.

Lopez, 37, remains in federal custody.

Luis Javier Algorri Franco, Tijuana's top public security official, said city police have cooperated with federal investigations into the department, providing voice recordings and fingerprints of officers, and turning over firearms for inspection.

"If an officer is linked to organized crime, then we ask they be detained and the law applied," Algorri said.

Algorri said he believes the investigation's details were leaked to Reforma to reflect badly on Hank's administration.

Frontera, a Tijuana newspaper, ran the story on its front page, but the accusations received less attention in other Baja California media.

"I believe it should certainly be investigated thoroughly," said Antonio Martinez Luna, the state attorney general.

Allegations of police collaboration with criminals aren't unusual in Baja California. A few months ago, Martinez came under scrutiny after a video was released of a man who alleged that state authorities were collaborating with drug runners.

State officials dismissed the video as the words of a self-professed criminal whose captors forced him to make the comments before he was killed. Martinez has denied any ties to organized crime. So has Hank, who has been linked to illicit activities but never charged.

Victor Clark, a Tijuana-based human rights activist who follows drug trafficking trends, said the effect of such stories is minimal because they reflect a reality here: Drug traffickers sometimes work with law enforcement officials, though the connections may be unclear.

"It's not just the city police, it's the other police agencies and the military," Clark said. "It's not new news. It's something that has historically taken place."

State authorities said the two officers killed last weekend were working with a team of state and federal officers when they stopped a suspicious car. Inside were Lopez and Ana Rosela Lopez Ramos, 28. The officers were taking them to a state office when they were attacked, according to a report released by state authorities.

State police officer Jesus Alberto Navarrete Pasos died shortly afterward and federal police officer Israel Urbina Lopez died Sunday morning.

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