

MACHETERO GETS 7 YEARS

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ABSTRACT

In arguing for the sentence, federal prosecutors cautioned that although Gonzalez-Claudio's advanced age and recently diagnosed Parkinson's disease might keep him from violent crimes, he still could be influential as a key figure in the Los Macheteros organization, a clandestine group that advocates the use of violence to win Puerto Rico's independence from the United States. Federal authorities have linked the group to two rocket attacks on federal buildings in Puerto Rico, the bombing of nine National Guard airplanes at an airport in Puerto Rico, and an armed assault on a U.S. Navy bus in Puerto Rico that killed two sailors and wounded 10 others.

FULL TEXT

Avelino Gonzalez-Claudio hardly looked the part of a notorious leader of a violent Puerto Rico pro-independence group that pulled off a \$7.1 million heist of a West Hartford Wells Fargo depot more than 25 years ago.

The 67-year-old grandfather appeared frail as he shuffled slowly into U.S. District Court on Wednesday dressed in an ill-fitting orange prison jumpsuit. His hands, clasped together, shook uncontrollably at times as he was sentenced to seven years in prison for his role in the robbery - and ordered to pay back the money.

In arguing for the sentence, federal prosecutors cautioned that although Gonzalez-Claudio's advanced age and recently diagnosed Parkinson's disease might keep him from violent crimes, he still could be influential as a key figure in the Los Macheteros organization, a clandestine group that advocates the use of violence to win Puerto Rico's independence from the United States.

They questioned whether he would resume his association with the group after his release from prison.

In February 2008, authorities found documents in Gonzalez-Claudio's home that they say showed he was still involved with the group. Among them was literature that provided guidance on how to conduct a "liberation struggle," a list of "military objectives or targets," a 2007 membership roster, an inventory of weapons held by Los Macheteros members, and a 23-page bomb-making manual.

"Los Macheteros not only remains active in Puerto Rico, but continues to issue communiqués calling for armed struggle against the commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the federal government," the prosecutors' sentencing memorandum said. "Continued association with the Los Macheteros therefore presents an ongoing public safety concern."

Gonzalez-Claudio pleaded guilty in February to conspiring to rob the Wells Fargo terminal on Sept. 12, 1983, and to transporting more than \$7 million in cash to Mexico. Los Macheteros intended to use the money to finance a war against federal interests on the island and to support leftist insurgencies elsewhere in Latin America, according to documents seized by authorities and other evidence.

Los Macheteros, a self-described Marxist revolutionary group, claimed responsibility in the 1970s and '80s for armed attacks - with Cuban support - on federal interests in Puerto Rico. Federal authorities have linked the group to two rocket attacks on federal buildings in Puerto Rico, the bombing of nine National Guard airplanes at an airport in Puerto Rico, and an armed assault on a U.S. Navy bus in Puerto Rico that killed two sailors and wounded 10 others.

Gonzalez-Claudio disappeared after being indicted as a conspirator in the Wells Fargo heist and was a fugitive for 22 years until his capture in Puerto Rico by the FBI in February 2008.

Authorities said the robbery was well-planned. Los Macheteros had one of their own -- Victor Gerena -- obtain a job

as a Wells Fargo guard. During the heist, the robbers overpowered the guards with a pistol and injected them with a narcotic to incapacitate them.

The cash was stuffed into a car, which was delivered to fellow Macheteros in the South End of Hartford.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Paul McConnell said Wednesday that none of the \$7.1 million "has ever been recovered."

Federal agents are still hunting for two fugitive Macheteros wanted in connection with the robbery: Gerena, who is on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List and believed to be hiding in Cuba, and Gonzalez-Claudio's brother, Norberto.

In arguing for a lesser sentence, Gonzalez-Claudio's lawyer, James W. Bergenn, portrayed his client as a "historical figure" in Puerto Rico and a "passionate believer" in its independence. He said Gonzalez-Claudio was a member of the group's "intelligentsia." Not all of the more than 300 members of the group - a group that included doctors, teachers and scientists - committed violent acts, he said.

While on the lam living under an alias, Gonzalez-Claudio taught computer skills at a local college. Ironically, Bergenn said, some of his students were judges.

Bergenn also noted the nearly two dozen family and friends - including his three sons - who traveled from Puerto Rico to attend Wednesday's sentencing. His children and grandchildren said Gonzalez-Claudio promoted free thinking and encouraged them to excel in life.

"He really is a remarkable gentleman," Bergenn said. "He's lived a life with an amazing legacy."

In a nod to the crowded courtroom gallery, Judge Alfred V. Covello told Gonzalez-Claudio that he is a "special and much-loved person." But Covello reminded Gonzalez-Claudio that he pleaded guilty to criminal charges in connection with the robbery and that Wells Fargo was without \$7 million.

"You just cannot walk away from that," Covello said.

When asked about whether Gonzalez-Claudio could pay back the \$7 million, Bergenn said his client was "penniless" and in debt. And his age and medical condition would make it hard for him to work, he said.

Bergenn said Gonzalez could be released in about 2 1/2 years. He said the 26 months his client has already served since his arrest will go toward the seven-year sentence, two-thirds of which Bergenn said he will likely serve.

The judge recommended that he be held at a federal prison in Puerto Rico.

Gonzalez-Claudio did not speak at length during Wednesday's hearing. Instead, one of his lawyers read a letter he wrote to the judge.

"The circumstances surrounding the struggle for Puerto Rican independence are different today from when I was younger," the letter read. "The struggle belongs to younger generations that have to set their own path. I hope that this path will be a less painful path and one of peace and understanding."

Illustration

PHOTO: COLOR MUG; Caption: Gonzalez-Claudio

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