

LA Avenues Gang Members Convicted of Murder Hate Crimes

Written by Robert ID2901

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Four gang members of the Avenues in L.A. have been convicted in connection with a six-year conspiracy to assault and murder African-Americans in the Highland Park area of Los Angeles.

All four defendants, members of the notorious Avenues street gang in L.A. were convicted of a conspiracy charge that alleges numerous violent assaults against African-Americans, including murders that took place in 1999 and in 2000. Specifically, the defendants were convicted of conspiring with each other and with other gang members to violate the civil rights of African-Americans in the gang's neighborhood by attacking and sometimes killing the victims. The jury found that the defendants caused the death of Christopher Bowser, an African-American man who was shot while waiting at a bus stop in Highland Park on Dec. 11, 2000. The jury also found that the defendants caused the death of Kenneth Kurry Wilson, an African-American man who was gunned down while looking for a parking place in Highland Park on April 18, 1999. The defendants convicted of the conspiracy are:

-- Gilbert Saldana, 27, a triggerman in the Wilson murder, who is currently serving a life sentence in state prison for another murder;

-- Alejandro Martinez, 28, who instigated the Wilson murder by using a racial slur and encouraging his fellow gang members to kill Wilson;

-- Fernando Cazares, 25, who served as a look-out during the Wilson murder; and

-- Porfirio Avila, 31, who is currently serving two life sentences in state prison for the murder of Christopher Bowser and another African-American man.

Defendants Saldana, Martinez and Cazares were also convicted for murdering Wilson because Wilson was African-American and because he was using a public street. Those three defendants were also convicted of using a firearm during the commission of a conspiracy and hate crimes. Finally, the jury found that the killing of Wilson constituted first-degree murder.

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One additional defendant, Merced Cambero, 27, who is alleged to have been the second triggerman in the Wilson murder, is currently a fugitive and remains under indictment.

"As this successful prosecution makes clear, acts of hateful violence targeted at individuals because of their race will be aggressively investigated and vigorously prosecuted," said Wan J. Kim, assistant attorney general for the Civil Rights Division. "The Department of Justice is committed to fighting hate and intolerance, as they tear at the very fabric of our great nation -- a fabric that is strengthened by its diversity of races, religions and national origins."

"In a diverse community such as Los Angeles, no one should face race-based threats and acts of violence, such as those committed by these defendants," said Debra Wong Yang, U.S. attorney for the Central District of California. "Mr. Wilson and Mr. Bowser were killed by the defendants simply because they were African-Americans who chose to live in a particular neighborhood. As this case demonstrates, we will aggressively pursue hate crimes such as this and convict those responsible for such reprehensible acts."

"The guilty verdicts in this case represent the successful and unprecedented result of a lengthy investigation into civil rights violations, including multiple violent assaults and murder, committed by this violent gang," said J. Stephen Tidwell, assistant director in charge of the FBI in Los Angeles. "The FBI is thoroughly committed to the protection of civil rights and will investigate all individuals or groups who espouse hate and carry out criminal activity based on hate. The FBI will continue to seek and is offering a \$20,000 reward for the remaining fugitive, Merced Cambero, to bring closure to the family of the victim who was murdered based on the color of his skin."

Each of the convicted defendants faces a mandatory life sentence in federal prison, without parole. U.S. District Judge Percy Anderson is scheduled to sentence Saldana, Martinez and Cazares on Oct. 23, and is scheduled to sentence Avilla on Nov. 20.

This case was investigated by the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department, under Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton, and was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Alex Bustamante from the U.S. Attorney's Office in Los Angeles and Deputy Chief Bobbi Bernstein from the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. Assistant Attorney General Wan J. Kim and U.S. Attorney Yang commended the joint efforts of the Justice Department, the FBI and the LAPD.

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