

Youth Guilty In the Slaying Of an Editor

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A teen-ager from Colombia was convicted yesterday of killing Manuel de Dios Unanue, a journalist who crusaded against drugs, in a plot that prosecutors said was tied to a powerful Colombian drug cartel that was angered by Mr. de Dios's writings.

A Federal District Court jury in Brooklyn found that the teen-ager, Wilson Alejandro Mejia Velez, 19, was the gunman who fired two bullets into Mr. Dios's head as he chatted at the bar in an Elmhurst, Queens, restaurant two years ago.

The killing seemed particularly chilling because, the authorities said, it apparently was the first time Colombian cartels had exported to the United States the practice of killing journalists who offended their leaders.

In the neighborhood where Mr. de Dios worked and was killed, many residents and business people said yesterday that the verdict sent a strong message. But Vicky Sanchez, Mr. de Dios's companion, business partner and the mother of his 4-year-old daughter, said there was more to be done. Prosecutors had argued at the trial that Mr. Mejia Velez, an illegal alien who worked at a Staten Island chair factory, was simply a hit man hired by another conspirator in a plot that could be traced to a leader of the Cali cartel. Five Others Guilty

The leader, who officials have identified as Jose Santacruz Londono, is reported to be at large in Colombia. Five conspirators besides Mr. Mejia Velez have been arrested in the United States and have pleaded guilty to roles in arranging the murder. All have cooperated with the authorities in hope of obtaining leniency at sentencing.

The verdict in the two-week trial came after seven hours of deliberations over two days and was delivered on the defendant's 19th birthday. Mr. Mejia Velez, a sharp-featured man with a crew cut, showed no emotion in the crowded courtroom as he listened through earphones while the jury's decision was translated into Spanish. Minutes earlier, he had been moving his lips rapidly as if praying.

Several feet away, in the front row of the gallery, his mother, Rosalba Velez, a 46-year-old widow who owns a grocery in a suburb of Medellin, Colombia, wept. "My son, my son," she moaned in Spanish. "They should have killed me." Another son, Hernan, in his early 20's, embraced her.

Mr. Mejia Velez faces life in prison when he is sentenced by Judge Edward R. Korman. No sentencing date has been set.

On the other side of the courtroom, Mr. de Dios's relatives and others who were close to him also wept and hugged one another. Later, standing in the drizzle outside the courthouse, Ms. Sanchez said, "Justice has been done for Manuel, for his daughter, his family and all the journalists who have been killed by the drug lords."

But she added that justice would not be complete until Mr. Santacruz, and any other high-level Cali cartel figures involved in the slaying, were brought to trial.

The chief prosecutor in the case, Eric Friedberg, an assistant United States attorney, said that because there is no extradition treaty between the United States and Colombia, it was unlikely that Mr. Santacruz would be brought to the United States for prosecution, even if he should be arrested in Colombia.

Mr. Mejia Velez's lawyer, Susan Kellman, said she would appeal the conviction.

"It's sad that one tragedy has to be followed by another," she said, calling Mr. Mejia Velez "a young man convicted on the words" of self-serving conspirators who had admitted other crimes, a reference to the fact that the chief witnesses against her client were two of the conspirators who made deals to testify against him.

Jurors left the courthouse without speaking with reporters, but later one said by telephone that the panel had not been persuaded by Ms. Kellman's argument that the accomplices had not been trustworthy because they were, in Ms. Kellman's words, "slime" and "garbage" desperate to save themselves. "The jury quickly agreed he was guilty," the juror said.

Mr. Mejia Velez and the five others arrested and prosecuted in the case were found after an extensive investigation by Federal and New York authorities, a joint effort reflected in the fact that the prosecution team consisted of two Federal prosecutors -- Mr. Friedberg and Julie Katzman -- and a Queens assistant district attorney, Francesco Catarisano, designated a special Federal prosecutor.

Mr. Mejia Velez was prosecuted on a Federal charge of having been part of a group that used facilities in foreign commerce, including telephones, to carry out a murder for payment. Officials said the chief reason he was prosecuted in Federal court, rather than on a murder charge in state court, is that under New York State law testimony by accomplices, a major element in this case, must be corroborated by additional evidence, while there is no such requirement in Federal law.

But as it turned out, the prosecutors did offer additional evidence designed to corroborate the testimony.

Mr. Mejia Velez exercised his right not to testify. But he had earlier vehemently denied killing Mr. de Dios.

A New York City police detective, Oscar Hernandez, who questioned the teen-ager after helping arrest him in Miami last May, testified that at one point in the interrogation, "He got down on his hands and knees and made a sign of the cross and said, 'Do these look like the hands of a killer?' " Wrote About Cartels

Mr. de Dios, a 48-year-old Queens resident, was a former editor-in-chief of El Diario-La Prensa, New York City's leading Spanish-language daily, and when he was killed he was publishing and writing two Spanish-language magazines: Crimen, or Crime, and Cambio XXI, or Change 21, a reference to the 21st century.

Among his articles in the magazines were exposes of the Cali cartel and its leaders. Mr. Santacruz was said by prosecutors to have ordered the killing because of anger over the articles and his desire to keep Mr. de Dios from publishing a book about the cartel. The book never was published.

The only witnesses at the trial who named Mr. Mejia Velez as the gunman were two of the five conspirators: Elkin Farley Salazar, who admitted he was a drug dealer who had participated in three other murder conspiracies, and Jose James Benitez, an admitted drug trafficker.