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Reputed Crime Boss in Southland Is Indicted

Action Against Milano and 14 Others 'Guts' Costa Nostra Operations, U.S. Officials Say

By Kim Murphy

The reputed chief of organized crime in Southern California was one of 15 suspected mobsters indicted Friday in a crackdown that federal officials say has "largely gutted" Cosa Nostra operations here.

Peter John Milano, 52, identified as head of the family that controls organized crime in the Southland, and his brother, Carmen Joseph Milano, 58, were named in an 18-count federal racketeering indictment connecting them with a broad range of criminal activities over the last four years.

"This prosecution, developed by the Organized Crime Strike Force program, is the most significant organized crime case on the West Coast in a decade," Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese III said in a statement announcing the indictments.

"The indictment and others to follow will involve as defendants virtually all of those the government charges make up the membership of the Cosa Nostra organized crime family in Los Angeles," Meese said.

Peter Milano, who has successfully evaded most local prosecution efforts over the last decade, is ranked among the 50 most important organized crime figures in the nation, controlling an empire federal prosecutors say was financed through extortion, loan-sharking and cocaine-trafficking activities.

Identified as Street Bosses

Also among those named in the federal grand jury indictment unsealed Friday were Luigi Gelfuso Jr. of North Hollywood and Vincent Dominic Caci of Palm Springs, identified as street bosses for the organization with longstanding ties to organized crime.

Eight of the 15 men indicted were arrested by federal agents Friday in Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Las Vegas and New Jersey.

The arrests were the culmination of a four-year investigation by the Department of Justice's Organized Crime Task Force and the FBI.

Through the use of electronic surveillance and undercover agents, federal authorities were able to link members of the Los Angeles family to cocaine shipments, murder attempts, assaults and extortions, all outlined in the indictment.

"With this prosecution, the main body of the Los Angeles family as a viable criminal enterprise has been largely gutted," U.S. Atty. Robert C. Bonner said at a news conference announcing the indictments.

'Deal a Severe Blow'

"We dealt a severe blow to the Los Angeles (crime) family. I think perhaps we have dealt a decapitating blow to them," said Richard T. Bretzing, special agent in charge of the FBI in Los Angeles.

The indictment follows the highly publicized prosecutions in New York of the leaders of New York's Colombo, Genovese, Lucchese and Gambino families. Three of those prosecutions led to 100-year prison terms for leaders of the organizations.

While Southern California's organized crime activity has never been as entrenched as it is on the East Coast, a number of Eastern and Midwestern families have attempted to establish beachheads in recent years--a movement that federal authorities are trying to halt through "vigorous" prosecution efforts, Bonner said.

"I think we've been blessed, if you will. I think it's fair to say that we don't have a Mafia family that is as entrenched as the families in New York City. That's clear.

"On the other hand, it would be a grave mistake to pooh-pooh what we do have by not acting very vigilantly . . . because the consequence, it seems to me, is an invitation to other organized crime families to take up residence in this area," Bonner said.

Prosecutions in 1980

One of the city's most successful organized crime prosecutions occurred in 1980 with the convictions of the late Dominic Brooklier, Samuel Sciortino, Louis Tom Dragna, Michael Rizzitello and Jack LoCicero.

Four men, including former Chicago mobster Vito Dominic Spillone, were convicted on extortion charges in Los Angeles last year.

The Milano family is one of 26 recognized families of the Cosa Nostra and the only one currently operating in Los Angeles, said Edwin J. Gale, chief attorney for the Organized Crime Strike Force.

According to the indictment, Peter Milano met in 1981 with the boss of a Cleveland Cosa Nostra family, Jack Licavoli, and informed him he was in charge of the Los Angeles family and had a "contract" to murder Dragna because of a statement Dragna had given to the FBI.

The indictment also links Peter Milano to a plan to kill co-defendant John Patrick DeMattia and orders to assault a San Fernando Valley man, Dennis Mondavano, to collect money from his father, Danny Mondavano.

Attempted Murders

Other members of the organization are linked to at least two attempted murders, one of them involving a government informant, and a variety of extortions in which businessmen were assaulted or threatened with physical harm for failure to pay a "street tax" or "tribute" to the organization.

According to the indictment, one of the defendants, John Joseph Vacarro Jr. of Las Vegas, told two men seeking admission to the family that he would consider it a "personal insult" if, by his next visit to Los Angeles, an unidentified bookmaker's head was not "split wide open like a watermelon."

In April, 1985, one of the potential members was told that a man named Mike Murray had won money in a card game from Charles James Caci, a defendant from Palm Springs. According to the indictment, Murray was to return the money "or get his head broken."

Informant Targeted

Four months later, family members apparently became aware that a government informant, Robert Kessler, was providing information to federal agents. One of the family members named in the indictment, Albert Jesus Nunez, searched for Kessler throughout Los Angeles in an attempt to kill him, the indictment alleges.

Peter Milano, a Westlake Village resident, served four years in prison in the mid-1970s for his conviction on charges of conspiracy to distribute heroin, violation of federal gambling statutes and extortion of Los Angeles-area bookmakers.

But neither he nor his brother, a resident of Tarzana, was charged after their arrest by local authorities in 1984 in what prosecutors said was an attempt to establish a \$1-million-a-week bookmaking operation in and around Los Angeles.

Those taken into custody Friday besides the Milanos were the Caci brothers; Robert Ralph d'Agostino of Palm Desert; Vacarro; Stephen Anthony Cino of Las Vegas and Arthur Franconeri of Bayonne, N.J.

Carmen Milano was freed on \$100,000 bail, while a federal magistrate set bail of \$50,000 for the Caci brothers. Bail hearings for the others in custody were postponed until next week.

No one appeared to be at Peter Milano's Westlake Village home Friday afternoon. A shiny black car parked in the driveway carried a license plate frame with the words "Mafia Staff Car" on it.

Abraham Anthony Prins, also named in the indictment, is already in custody in an Illinois federal prison.

Still sought by FBI agents are Gelfuso, of Los Angeles; his son, Michael Gelfuso of Burbank; John DeMattia of Los Angeles; Rocco Zangari of Palm Springs; Nunez, from Camarillo, and Stephen Munichiello of Los Angeles.