

Beat: News

MS-13 Gang Member Sentenced to Life in Prison for Racketeering Conspiracy

Defendant's Participation in Two Murders

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USPA NEWS - Chief U.S. District Judge James K. Bredar on May 6th sentenced Oscar Armando Sorto Romero, a/k/a "Lobo," age 23, to life in federal prison for a racketeering conspiracy and for racketeering, as well as related violent crimes in aid of racketeering, including two murders, connected to his participation in La Mara Salvatrucha, a transnational criminal enterprise also known as MS-13. On January 24, 2022, a federal jury convicted Sorto Romero of the racketeering charges, along with co-defendants Jose Joya Parada, a/k/a "Calmado," age 21, Milton Portillo-Rodriguez, a/k/a "Little Gangster," age 26; and Juan Carlos Sandoval-Rodriguez, a/k/a "Picaro," age 24, after a three-month trial. Portillo-Rodriguez and Sandoval-Rodriguez were also convicted of multiple counts of murder in aid of racketeering.

The sentence was announced by United States Attorney for the District of Maryland Erik L. Barron; Special Agent in Charge Thomas J. Sobocinski of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Baltimore Field Office; Acting Special Agent in Charge Selwyn Smith of Homeland Security Investigations, Baltimore Office; Chief Jason Lando of the Frederick City Police Department; Frederick County Sheriff Charles A. "Chuck" Jenkins; Frederick County State's Attorney J. Charles Smith, III; Chief Amal E. Awad of the Anne Arundel County Police Department; Anne Arundel County State's Attorney Anne Colt Leitess; Chief Malik Aziz of the Prince George's County Police Department; Prince George's County State's Attorney Aisha Braveboy; Chief Marcus Jones of the Montgomery County Police Department; and Montgomery County State's Attorney John McCarthy.

MS-13 is a national and international gang composed primarily of immigrants or descendants from El Salvador and other central American countries. Branches or "cliques" of MS-13, one of the largest street gangs in the United States, operate throughout Frederick County, Anne Arundel County, Prince George's County, and Montgomery County, Maryland. Sorto Romero was a member of the Parque Vista Locos Salvatruchas ("PVLS") clique and his co-defendants were members of the Fulton Locos Salvatruchas ("FLS") clique.

The evidence at the three-month trial established that between 2015 and 2017, the defendants engaged in drug trafficking, extortion, and brutal acts of violence against suspected rivals of the gang in an effort to increase MS-13's power in the Frederick County, Montgomery County, and Anne Arundel County areas of Maryland.

At all times of this conspiracy, members of MS-13 were expected to protect the name, reputation, and status of the gang from rival gang members and other persons. To protect the gang and to enhance its reputation, MS-13 members were expected to use any means necessary to force respect from those who showed disrespect, including acts of intimidation and violence. MS-13 had mottos consistent with its rules, beliefs, expectations and reputation including "mata, viola, controla," which translates as, "kill, rape, control," and "ver, oir y callar," which means, "see nothing, hear nothing and say nothing." One of the principal rules of MS-13 is that its members must attack and kill rivals, often referred to as "chavalas," whenever possible.

MS-13 members are required to commit acts of violence both to maintain membership and discipline within the gang, as well as against rival gang members. Participation in criminal activity by a member, particularly in violent acts directed at rival gangs or as directed by gang leadership, increase the respect accorded to that member, resulting in that member maintaining or increasing his position in the gang, and opens the door to promotion to a leadership position.

As detailed during the trial, from 2015 through 2017, the Fulton clique of MS-13 sought to increase its presence in Frederick, Wheaton, and Annapolis, Maryland through numerous acts of violence, extortion, and drug sales. Trial evidence focused on the defendants' participation in four grisly murders of those suspected of association with rival gang members carried out in 2017.

Trial evidence related to Sorto-Romero focused on his participation in two of those four murders. First, on April 2, 2017, the gang kidnapped an individual from Silver Spring, Maryland and brought him to a wooded area in Frederick, where he was killed with knives and machetes before being buried in a shallow grave. Before being taken to Frederick, the victim, who was extremely intoxicated, was held in a basement laundry room in Wheaton, Maryland by members and associates of MS-13, including by co-defendant Joya Parada. Inside the laundry room, the victim was forced to remove his shirt so that gang members could examine his tattoos to satisfy

themselves that the victim was associated with a rival gang and should therefore be killed.

Sorto Romero was contacted by members of MS-13 to assist with the victim's murder. He agreed to assist as long as other, more junior gang members could participate to move up in the gang. Sorto Romero arranged vehicles to transport the victim and other members of MS-13 to the wooded area in Frederick where the victim would be killed. Sorto Romero and others went to the laundry room where the victim was being held, and they placed him in the backseat of a car in which Sorto Romero was a passenger. In the meantime, Joya Parada and other members of MS-13 went to the woods in Frederick with weapons and a shovel to dig a grave and to wait for the victim's arrival. Sorto Romero eventually arrived with the victim, delivering the victim to other members of MS-13 who were waiting, including Joya Parada. A member of MS-13 incapacitated the victim by hitting him in the head with a tree branch.

Joya Parada and others then dragged the victim through the woods to the hole they had dug for the victim's grave. They placed the victim face down on the ground next to the hole and stabbed and slashed his body repeatedly with a machete. Joya Parada personally participated in this murder not only by slashing the victim with the long edge of the machete blade, but also by plunging the point of the machete into the victim's back numerous times. The victim died as a result of the blunt force trauma, stabbing, cutting, and chopping inflicted by Joya Parada and his co-conspirators. Sorto Romero then picked up several gang members who participated in the murder to drive them home. During their drive back, MS-13 members stopped to dispose of the machete in a storm drain and threw a shovel away in a dumpster.

On August 5, 2017, MS-13 lured another victim to Quiet Waters Park in Annapolis. When he arrived, the victim was hit in the head with a hammer and slashed with a machete until he died. The trial evidence revealed that the victim was a low-level member of the PVLS clique of MS-13 (the same clique as Sorto Romero) and was suspected of warning one of his relatives, who was believed to be in a rival gang, that he was an MS-13 target. Sorto Romero and co-defendant Portillo Rodriguez participated in the planning and execution of the murder of this victim. Once the victim arrived, an MS-13 member who was part of the PVLS clique hit the victim in the head with a hammer. The victim screamed after he was hit. Then, members of MS-13 dragged the victim to a hole that had been dug deeper in the woods. Sorto Romero and Portillo Rodriguez assisted in digging the hole earlier that day.

Once at the hole, Sorto Romero, Portillo Rodriguez, and other members of MS-13 took turns striking the victim's neck and shoulder area with a machete in an unsuccessful effort to decapitate the victim. Although they were unable to decapitate the victim, Sorto Romero, Portillo Rodriguez, and others struck the victim numerous times until he died. The victim was then buried in a clandestine grave in the park. After the murder, members of MS-13 took clothing and other evidence to a nearby house where the clothing was burned in a grill.

According to trial evidence, these murders were all intended to maintain and increase the status of MS-13, as well as allow individual MS-13 members to maintain or increase their status within the gang.

More than 30 MS-13 gang members and associates have been convicted in this and a related case.

On April 20, 2022, Chief Judge Bredar sentenced Jose Joya Parada, a/k/a "Calmado," age 20, to 50 years in federal prison, for a racketeering conspiracy, racketeering, and related violent crimes in aid of racketeering. Portillo-Rodriguez and Sandoval-Rodriguez each face a mandatory sentence of life in prison for each of the murder in aid of racketeering charges. Chief Judge Bredar has scheduled sentencing for Portillo Rodriguez for May 13, 2022, at 10 a.m and for Sandoval Rodriguez for May 25, 2022, at 2:30 p.m.

This case is part of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a program bringing together all levels of law enforcement and the communities they serve to reduce violent crime and make our neighborhoods safer for everyone. Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN) is the centerpiece of the Department of Justice's violent crime reduction efforts. PSN is an evidence-based program proven to be effective at reducing violent crime. Through PSN, a broad spectrum of stakeholders work together to identify the most pressing violent crime problems in the community and develop comprehensive solutions to address them. As part of this strategy, PSN focuses enforcement efforts on the most violent offenders and partners with locally based prevention and reentry programs for lasting reductions in crime.

This case is an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach that leverages the strengths of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies against criminal networks.

Anyone with information about MS-13 is encouraged to provide their tips to law enforcement. The FBI and Homeland Security Investigations both have nationwide tiplines that you can call to report what you know. You can reach the FBI at 1-866-STP-MS13

(1-866-787-6713), or you can call HSI at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE.

United States Attorney Erik L. Barron commended the FBI; HSI; the Frederick Police Department; the Frederick County Sheriff's Office; the Anne Arundel, Montgomery, and Prince George's County Police Departments; and the Anne Arundel, Frederick, Montgomery, and Prince George's County State's Attorneys for their work in the investigation, and the Baltimore County Police Department for its assistance. Mr. Barron thanked Assistant U.S. Attorneys Kenneth S. Clark, Zachary Stendig, and Anatoly Smolkin, who are prosecuting this case.

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