

ORANGE COUNTY

Latinos Ask Speedy Investigation Into Beaten Man's Death

By DAVID REYES, *Times Staff Writer*

Orange County Latino leaders on Monday urged the Orange County coroner and Santa Ana police to work around-the-clock to complete their investigations of the death of Ezequiel Flores Larios to help defuse community tension.

Larios, a 25-year-old father of two, died July 10 from injuries he received when he was struck on the head by police nightsticks during a struggle four days earlier with two Santa Ana officers who arrested him. He was buried Monday at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery in Orange.

'Tremendous Fear'

"There's a tremendous fear right now in our community," Amin David, a spokesman for the American G.I. Forum, said at a news conference. He said resentment has arisen because of claims of police harassment and use of excessive force to arrest Latinos.

Santa Ana Police Chief Raymond Davis, who attended the conference, apologized to the Larios family on behalf of the Police Department for the "tragic" incident and promised the full cooperation of police with Latino leaders and their organizations to resolve any community tension.

A spokesman for Sheriff Brad Gates, whose department oversees the coroner's office, said Gates is aware of the sensitive nature of Larios' death and plans to release a coroner's report as soon as possible.

'Deep Concerns'

At the news conference, held in Santa Ana, leaders of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and human relations commissions from Santa Ana and Orange County joined David in the appeal to law enforcement agencies to speed up their investigations.

Clara Nava, Santa Ana LULAC president, said many Latino residents have told her organization that they have "deep concerns" about police actions and that they

do not understand why the investigation is taking so long. The coroner's office has said it will take at least three weeks to finish its investigation. A preliminary autopsy report indicated Larios died of a head wound he suffered during the altercation with officers.

The FBI, as part of a U.S. Justice Department inquiry, began investigating last week whether Larios' civil rights were violated. In addition, independent investigations by the Orange County district attorney's office, Sheriff's Department and the Santa Ana Police Department are under way.

Davis, in offering the department's apology, said: "We are very sorry that it happened. It is unfortunate that anyone loses their life."

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Raymond Davis
Santa Ana Police Chief

He added the department intends to cooperate "100%" with Latino leaders and their organizations.

In addition to a speedy investigation, leaders of the Latino organizations called for:

— An Orange County Grand Jury investigation to help monitor pending law enforcement investigations. Such a request is expected to be formally made today by a member of the Larios family.

— The Police Department to release the coroner's findings as soon as possible. Short of that, the leaders called for the release of a preliminary report of Santa Ana's internal investigation.



SCOTT FLYNN

Clara Nava, president of Santa Ana League of United Latin American Citizens, with Santa Ana

Police Chief Raymond Davis at press conference on death of Latino man at hands of police.

DEATH: Inquiry Urged

—The Police Department to treat the Larios family with dignity. Leaders criticized police descriptions of Larios as a "drug suspect." Officers initially stopped him on a traffic violation but found no drugs in his possession.

—The suspension of the two officers involved—Steve Alegre, 27, and John Follo, 24—should an investigation reveal any criminal wrongdoing. In the interim, the officers should be permanently reassigned patrol duties in another part of the city. (The officers were reassigned Friday by superiors in a move to ease community tensions.)

Davis did not comment on the leaders' requests or the investigation his department is conducting because, the chief said, he wants a "fair" investigation.

Davis described the Latino leaders and their organizations as "our friends" who "should be looking

into these things."

"We called in the district attorney's office (because) we wanted some external agencies involved in the investigation to pass judgment," Davis said.

The sheriff's office, which oversees the coroner's activities, "is not dragging its feet," and intends to release a coroner's report "as soon as possible," Gates said through a spokesman.

The spokesman, Lt. Richard Olson, said Gates discussed the leaders' concerns during a telephone call with David after the news conference.

Gates is "very tuned in to the sensitivity of the community right now," Olson said. "And that's what he talked about to Mr. David."

Since Larios' death, the Orange County Human Relations Commission has received many complaints of alleged police harassment and

excessive force from residents throughout Santa Ana, said Rebecca Esparza, a human relations commissioner.

In the last six days as part of a monitoring effort, a human relations team assisted by Assistant Police Chief Eugene Hansen and Jose Vargas, the department's Spanish-speaking liaison officer, have met with residents to discuss the harassment and excessive-force complaints, Esparza said.

"One of the things we heard was that these people are constantly harassed," said Nava of LULAC, who joined the team. "But we found out that they have never taken steps to file a complaint form."

Nava said LULAC may begin a community awareness project to help educate Latino residents and improve police-community relations.

About 150 people attended a Mass in Spanish for Larios at Our Lady of the Pillar Catholic Church in Santa Ana on Monday.