

Southern Poverty Law Center

Intelligence Report

Gauging the Gangs

A respected writer spent five years studying the Mexican Mafia. What he discovered will shock even the most seasoned cop.

interview by Brentin Mock

Whenever Tony Rafael leaves home, he carries a .45-caliber handgun nestled in a holster just below his armpit. A Cold Steel Recon-1 knife is stashed elsewhere on his person. Concealed weapons permits are hard to come by in Los Angeles County, but Rafael is a special case.

For the past five years, the respected writer and gang expert -- who uses only the name he writes under in public because of his dangerous work -- has been researching one of the deadliest gangs in America for a nonfiction book he's writing on the Mexican Mafia, or "La Eme"(the Spanish word for the letter 'M'), tentatively titled *Southern Soldiers*. His sources are of the "L.A. Confidential" variety: prison inmates, gang members past and present, homicide detectives, FBI agents and their informants. He has volunteered for the Los Angeles Police Department, conducting long-term surveillance outside gang hangouts, and has dug up the cases of hundreds of gang members from the county court system to document the bloody swath they've cut across Los Angeles.

One heart-arresting fact the streetwise investigator recently uncovered is that Mexican Mafia leaders have declared a "green light" on African Americans found in neighborhoods claimed by the powerful prison-based gang. This means that members of Latino street gangs affiliated with the La Eme are under orders to harass, assault, and even murder African-Americans, who Mexican Mafia leaders view as sub-human.

The reason for this, Rafael has found, is that a longstanding prison gang war between the Mexican Mafia and the African-American prison gang, Black Guerilla Family, has led to a deep racial loathing between the gangs that has spilled over into the streets of Los Angeles County.

Until now, media coverage of this issue has missed the Mexican Mafia connection by focusing narrowly on the convictions of four members of a single street gang, the Avenues, for violating federal hate crime laws by murdering blacks in the Highland Park neighborhood. According to Rafael and other gang experts, the problem is far more pervasive.

Rafael sat down with the *Intelligence Report* in his Los Angeles office in October to discuss the shocking truths he found about the Mexican Mafia and how its leaders have ordered Latino gangs outside the prisons to sow terror among African Americans.

INTELLIGENCE REPORT: How did you find out about the Mexican Mafia's policy of racist violence against blacks?

TONY RAFAEL: I've been researching for a book on the Mexican Mafia that will be published next year. I became aware of this as a result of that research, and it was a shock. I knew the Mexican Mafia collected taxes [from street gangs], but I didn't realize they had initiated a policy of ethnic cleansing. This comes from the top. This comes from the shot callers. The guy who issued the order to the Avenues [one of many Mexican Mafia-controlled street gangs] to get rid of all blacks was a guy by the name of Alex "Pee Wee" Aguirre. Aguirre is a made man in the Mexican Mafia, he came from the Avenues originally, and he's currently serving a life term at a federal penitentiary in Marion, Ill.

IR: And this truly amounts to a policy of "ethnic cleansing"?

RAFAEL: Absolutely. There's no doubt about it. These cases are scary. Take [Latino gang member] Frank Limón -- he shot a black male named Eric Green. Green and a friend of his were stopped at a stop sign on 11th Street and Pomona [in Pomona], and Limón just came up to him and shot him in the head, wounding him severely. Green is partially paralyzed, he's developed cognitive disorders, and he walks slowly, because the bullet is lodged in his brain and can't be removed.

Limón grew up next to black families in the neighborhood. He and Green knew each other and had no problems with each other personally. In fact, Limón used to go to Green's birthday parties when they were kids. But a week after Limón was jumped into the Pomona 12 [street gang], he started shooting at black kids because the Mexican Mafia had "green lighted" all blacks in the neighborhood. And when you click up with a gang that's loyal to the Mexican Mafia, the Mexican Mafia comes before God, your family, and your friends going all the way back to childhood. When they tell you to do something, you gotta do it.

IR: Why would the gangs take up this kind of race war?

RAFAEL: Well, to understand the background of these racial shootings and homicides you need to first understand some background on how the Mexican Mafia operates. They're primarily a prison gang, like the Black Guerilla Family and Aryan Brotherhood. What the Mexican Mafia has been able to do is project power outside of the prison system. There are only about 250 to 300 Mexican Mafia members in the California prison system that are fully validated ["made"] members, but what I compare them to are the generals and colonels of an army out on the streets. Everything south of Bakersfield is

considered a Mexican Mafia stronghold, basically what you call *sureños*, or "south-siders."

Those *sureños* are obliged, whether they like it or not, to swear allegiance to the Mexican Mafia. If you're a little gang member in Avenues [the name of a Los Angeles neighborhood, as well as the gang that operates there] or Conoga Park and you're dealing in drugs, or some other illegal activity, you have to pay the Mexican Mafia a street tax. If you're dealing dope, you gotta buy your dope from the Mexican Mafia, you sell it and once you sell it you owe them a percentage of your profits.

In southern California, the Mexican Mafia and the [other] Hispanic street gangs have achieved what I call complete vertical integration. Say there's a little gang member who'll get arrested, he'll go to prison, and the minute he lands in prison they give him what they call the "X Files," the rules and regulations of the Mexican Mafia.

For example, one of those rules is that, if you're on a tier, if you're in the number one or the last cell in the tier, and you're celled up with another Mexican, one of you two has to stay awake at all times. That's the rules, so no one will sneak up on you. Also, the *bloqueros*, the guys in charge of the cell block, they have to collect from everyone on the tier and kick up to the Mexican Mafia leaders. They control the county jails and the state prison system. And because they control the jails and the prisons, they control the streets, because if you're an independent and you say, "Screw you. I don't wanna pay my taxes," they will either get you on the street -- they green light you and kill you, assault you, whatever they wanna do -- or they catch you when you enter the prison system.

You have to understand, these gang members are looking to go to jail or prison. They expect it. To them, it's just an extension of the streets. All their friends are there, their family's there, all their ol' homies from growing up in the 'hood, they're all there. But if they want to remain a part of that culture, and if they want to be under the Mexican Mafia's protection, they have to obey the Mexican Mafia's rules and follow their orders, inside and outside the penal system.

IR: And why do those orders include terrorizing and killing blacks?

RAFAEL: They don't want blacks in their neighborhoods. They say it makes their neighborhood look bad.

It started with the Mexican Mafia ordering street gangs to cleanse themselves of black members, before they moved on to cleansing neighborhoods. For example, the 18th Street gang, this was a [MacArthur Park neighborhood] gang that had blacks and Hispanics in it for a long time, up until about 10 years ago, when the Mexican Mafia leaders told the 18th Street, "If you don't want to get green-lighted, get all the blacks out of your gang." They had to go. Before that, the 18th Street gang was an equal opportunity employer. But the Mexican Mafia said, "We can't have it, can't have blacks in our gangs."

The way I hear these knuckleheads tell it, they don't want their neighborhoods infested with blacks, as if it's an infestation. It's just pure racial animosity that manifests itself in a policy of a major criminal organization.

IR: Does the Mexican Mafia have the same policy toward whites or Asians?

RAFAEL: No. In fact, in the California prison system the Aryan Brotherhood and the Mexican Mafia have made an alliance to gang up against the Black Guerilla Family. It's common knowledge in the prison system that if there's a fight between a Mexican Mafia member and a black inmate, and there aren't enough Mexican Mafia guys to jump on his side, the Aryans are supposed to jump in on his side. This is an alliance that goes back 20 years. The Mexican Mafia and the Aryan Brotherhood have a mutual racial hatred for blacks.

IR: The Avenues killings and the Avenues gang have been getting all the media attention recently, but there are a lot of other street gangs loyal to the Mexican Mafia. How many of them also target blacks?

RAFAEL: All of them. What happened in the Avenues is happening all over southern California. I wouldn't go so far as to say it's happening throughout all of Los Angeles, or that there's policy to drive blacks out of the entire metropolitan area, but it's certainly happening in all the areas where the Mexican Mafia and their allied gangs feel they have control.

For example, they don't control Beverly Hills or the west side of Los Angeles. But places like [the Los Angeles neighborhood of] Highland Park, very strong presence. Pomona, very strong. West and north San Fernando Valley, extremely strong. And these are places where you don't see many blacks living in the first place, so wherever the Mexican Mafia has a very strong or extremely strong presence, the blacks who live there are going to have problems. The federal government is aware of this, and the decision to prosecute the Avenues using federal hate crime laws came from the highest levels of the U.S. Attorney's office. They were basically using the Avenues case to send a message to the Mexican Mafia leaders, to say, "This is not going to happen."

IR: And are those gang leaders getting the message?

RAFAEL: They got it, but they don't care. It's not like their reaction has been, "Message heard, okay, we're gonna back off." One week before the [Avenues federal hate crimes trial] ended, another black kid was killed by the Avenues 43.

IR: What level of truth is there to the rumor that Bloods and Crips are going to start carrying out similar racial attacks on Latinos as a form of revenge?

RAFAEL: It's already happening. There was one case in the Avenues already where three [Latino] family members were shot and killed by two black guys with AK-47s. The victims were civilians, not gang members. The killers rolled up on them in central Avenues, opened up on them with the AKs, then, after the [Latino] guys were down, the [black gang members] walked up and shot them in the back. It was coup de grâce, assassination, pure-out assassination. So, yes, unfortunately, it's started.

IR: Some people who live in Highland Park point out that many of these killings [of blacks] happened years ago, and that it was a relatively small problem caused by a relatively small group. But you're saying this is still a big problem today, in more areas than just Highland Park?

RAFAEL: Absolutely. It's not like if you're black they're definitely going to shoot you on sight if they only see you once in Highland Park. However, if you move there, like [2000 murder victim] Anthony Prudhomme, and they see you going in and out of your house all the time, or you start hanging out there regularly, like [2001 murder victim] Christopher Bowser, sitting in front of a bus bench with your boom box, yeah, you'll have problems.

IR: You think that was a cultural thing with Bowser, them not liking a black man imposing on their public space with noise from his boom box?

RAFAEL: I think the boom box just made him stick out more. They just didn't want Bowser hanging out there, period, because he was black. He had been beaten up and robbed before and called the usual epithets. The [1999 murder victim] Kenneth Wilson case, though, was weirder. Wilson didn't even live in Highland Park. He was just visiting a friend of his, and he went out to move his car because it was parked illegally, blocking somebody's driveway, and he had the random misfortune of coming across one of the four most vicious guys there are, [Avenues gang member Gilbert "Lucky" Saldana.

Saldana is an outright racist. He's the one who uttered the infamous words, "Wanna kill a nigger?" before Wilson was shot. And Wilson was targeted at random. He was just parking his car when these guys went out looking to kill a black guy. He was totally innocent.

IR: Let's say a member of a street gang under the Mexican Mafia's authority obeys all the other rules and pays his taxes, but when it comes to terrorizing blacks, he says, "Look, I have no problem with black people just for being black, so I don't want to do this," does he have that kind of wiggle room?

RAFAEL: No.

IR: So then, if he carries out an assault or a killing because he's under racist orders, even though he's not a racist himself, is that still truly a hate crime, or is it more accurately described as a gang hit?

RAFAEL: The guys prosecuted in the [federal] Avenues case, there was nobody holding a gun to their head. They went out looking for blacks to kill to earn stripes, and to curry favor and to bring up their status with the Mexican Mafia. They may have hated blacks and been down with killing blacks to begin with, or they may have just said, "To show you I'm with the program, I'll go out and do what I gotta do." But the end result is the same, and it's really at a basic level driven by the same sort of racial purity theories as nut groups like the KKK.

IR: Are there really any theories or ideology to the Mexican Mafia's racism, or is it just disorganized, visceral hatred?

RAFAEL: The Mexican Mafia derives inspiration and ethnic pride from the concept of La Raza (Spanish, in this context, for "The Race"), as well as from the Aztec, Aztlan movement. And this goes way back. There was a Mexican Mafia shot caller back in the 1970s named Rudolph Cheyenne Cardena, and before he was killed by rival Mexican gang members in 1978 or 1977, Cardena saw the Mexican Mafia the way George Jackson [a prominent member of the original Black Panther Party who founded the Black Guerilla Family] saw the black prison movement. He wanted to change the Mexican Mafia into a political, socially active movement, and what he used for inspiration was the Aztec culture. He taught himself Nahuatl [the ancient language of the Aztecs], started teaching it to all the other homies. In fact, to this day they still use Nahuatl to send coded messages to one another -- these kinds of three level-coded messages. You have to know the code, and then Nahuatl and so on. And one of the symbols of the Mexican Mafia is the Aztec worship [symbol].

They've brought in the Aztec heritage as part of their philosophical inspiration, and there are no black people in the Aztec culture. La Raza comes first to these guys. They see themselves as a race unto themselves, and there's really not too much room for anybody else.

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