

Blacks Were Targeted, Witness Insists; A Highland Park gang member testifies in a civil rights conspiracy trial that a 1999 murder was part of a racial cleansing campaign.

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A former Avenues street gang member acknowledged Wednesday that he had lied repeatedly about the murder of a black man who authorities allege was the target of an organized campaign to harass, threaten and kill African Americans in Highland Park.

The defense in the federal conspiracy case pushed hard to suggest that the violent incidents Jesse Diaz recounted were directed at black gang members, and not all African Americans. But Diaz pushed back, testifying that he repeatedly lied to police, federal agents and grand jurors but in the end told the truth, that the 1999 murder of Kenneth Wilson, 38, was part of a racial cleansing campaign.

Federal authorities need to show that the murder was part of a concerted effort between 1995 and 2000 to push blacks out of the largely blue-collar neighborhood in order to prove their unusual civil rights conspiracy case.

Prosecutors, including a top official in the civil rights division of the Justice Department in Washington, are using a Reconstruction-era law to prosecute four gang members for what they call a racially motivated conspiracy to deny blacks the right to select where they want to live.

It was the second full day of testimony for Diaz, one of three members of the feared northeast Los Angeles-area street gang set to testify in the case.

Diaz is serving 20 years for the attempted murder of a black man in Highland Park on May 2, 1999. He testified in tan prison garb, his left arm shackled to the witness box.

Wilson was gunned down on the street, sustaining wounds from three different weapons. Prosecutors allege the conspiracy also included two other murders, that of Anthony Prudhomme on Nov. 3, 2000, and of Christopher Bauser on Nov. 11, 2000.

Defendants Gilbert Saldana, Alejandro Martinez, Fernando Cazares and Porfirio Avila were seated during the testimony with their counsel, behind a three-tiered set of risers built into the courtroom of U.S. District Judge Percy Anderson. In contrast to Diaz, who appeared in prison garb, each defendant

was neatly dressed in a pressed shirt. Avila wore thick eyeglasses, and Saldana peered over the rim of reading glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

Saldana and Avila are both serving state prison terms of life without parole for murder. Avila was convicted in state court of killing Wilson; authorities said police lacked evidence at the time to charge him with a hate crime.

The defense disputes that the murder was part of a campaign, suggesting instead that it was a typical gang killing committed "out of boredom." The defense also has cited a general antipathy between violent street gangs, including black and Latino gangs.

Diaz's familiarity with criminal procedure was apparent as he sparred with Deputy Federal Public Defender Reuven L. Cohen, who represents Saldana. The cross-examination covered, in part, seven years of association with federal and Los Angeles law enforcement officials, interviews and testimony.

"I don't remember," Diaz responded at one point. "Would you like me to refresh my memory?" -- parroting a phrase lawyers often use to prompt witnesses.

"I would love to refresh your memory," Cohen replied.

The day included fewer of the racial epithets that punctuated Diaz's earlier testimony. One white female juror had physically recoiled in apparent disgust as Diaz described the Avenues' alleged hatred of African Americans.

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John Spano

Times Staff Writer

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