

# MEXICO

## Union worker's murder alarms U.S. activists

### A union organizer's murder in Mexico has sparked questions about corruption in a U.S. government program that brings seasonal farm workers legally to the United States.

The Miami Herald  
May. 07, 2007

MONTERREY, Mexico --

Santiago Cruz moved to this northern Mexico city to help organize Mexican farm workers bound for the United States under a legal guest-worker program. His killers spared him no agony.

They bound his hands and feet with strips of T-shirt, strangled him using a beach towel adorned with a cartoon U.S. dollar bill and smashed his head through a wooden banister.

The slaying last month remains unsolved, alarming human rights activists on both sides of the border. Police won't talk about their investigation, but Cruz's friends say they're certain he was killed because of his efforts to stop corruption in a little-known program that brings seasonal workers legally to U.S. farms.

Cruz worked for the Ohio-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee, an affiliate of the AFL-CIO. The committee represents thousands of Mexicans who travel to the United States each year with H2A visas, which the United States grants to workers recruited abroad.

Two weeks before his death, Cruz had begun an education campaign in nearby villages aimed at stopping rogue recruiters from extorting illegal fees from farm workers headed north.

"We were shaking up big forces," said Castulo Benavides, the union's Monterrey director.

Cruz was found murdered April 9 in his office. His possessions were undisturbed and now are packed into a lime-green suitcase with no immediate destination.

Globs of crimson blood still dot the walls and floors.

Union supporters have blasted authorities in the state of Nuevo León for not solving the crime yet.

Last week, the Washington-based Inter-American Commission on Human Rights urged the state government to find the killers and protect union members.

The union has renamed its office -- in a nondescript strip mall near the U.S. consulate -- the Santiago Rafael Cruz Justice Center and has started a fund for his family.

The AFL-CIO has condemned the murder, as has the city council in Toledo, Ohio, where the farm labor committee is headquartered.

U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, is trying to organize a congressional delegation to visit Monterrey and investigate Cruz's death and alleged corruption among recruiters of temporary agricultural workers.

The committee represents about 6,000 seasonal farm workers, many of whom travel each year under the temporary H2A agricultural visa to the tobacco, cucumber and sweet potato fields of North Carolina.

The workers are recruited by companies that, under contract from farms in the United States, screen them in Mexico, process their U.S. visas and transport them north. About 50,000 workers are projected to travel to the United States this year under the H2A program.

Under U.S. law, the employers must pay the costs of paperwork and transportation, but farm workers complain that some recruiters charge them for those expenses.

Three years ago, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee opened its office in Monterrey, where most H2A visas are processed through the U.S. consulate each year.

"From the time we got there, we weren't popular with the recruiters," said committee President Baldemar Velásquez, a Texas-born Mexican-American reared as a farm worker who's now based in Ohio.

Before Cruz's death, intruders had ransacked the office twice, Velásquez said.

Cruz, who'd arrived in Monterrey about six weeks before his death, grew up in Oaxaca state in southern Mexico. He'd begun working with the committee in Ohio after entering the United States illegally.

About a year and a half ago, Cruz quit the committee and took a job at a tomato-canning plant to earn more money. While he was working there, U.S. immigration agents detained him and sent him back to Mexico. The committee offered him a job in its Monterrey office.