

FBI murders Puerto Rican independence figure

By Bill Van Auken
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The fatal September 23 shooting of Puerto Rican nationalist leader Filiberto Ojeda Rios represents an act of state terror and cold-blooded murder by the US government. It is one more proof that in the name of a “global war on terrorism,” Washington has arrogated to itself the right to conduct political assassinations and act as judge, jury and executioner against opponents of US policies and interests.

Aged 72, Ojeda Rios was the leader of the Boricua Popular Army, also known as the Macheteros, a group that advocated independence for Puerto Rico. He was wanted on charges that he had participated in the planning of a 1983 Wells Fargo armored car robbery in Hartford, Connecticut, in which \$7.1 million was taken. A fugitive for 15 years since fleeing house arrest in 1990, he was sentenced in absentia to 55 years in jail.

Ojeda Rios was alone with his wife in their home in the rural southwestern Puerto Rican municipality of Hormigueros, near the city of Mayagüez, when scores of FBI agents stormed his property, unleashing a rain of bullets. According to reports, at least 100 armed agents were involved, backed by helicopters and a squad of military sharpshooters brought to the island from Virginia.

The nationalist leader was struck by a single bullet from a sharpshooter’s high-powered rifle. While he suffered no wound to any vital organ, he was left to bleed to death on the floor of his home as FBI agents refused to allow Puerto Rican authorities and emergency medical teams anywhere near the house, maintaining a militarized perimeter for 24 hours.

Later, an FBI spokesman claimed that the agents who had surrounded the house and shot Ojeda Rios feared that the house could be wired with explosives and were waiting for reinforcements to fly in from the US.

Testimony from his wife and a neighbor, as well as

the results of an autopsy, exposed as lies the FBI’s version of events. US authorities had claimed that federal agents had come to arrest Ojeda Rios, opening fire only after he had fired on them.

In a press conference Monday, however, the nationalist leader’s wife, Elma Beatriz Rosado Barbosa, testified, “On Friday, September 23, in the afternoon hours, our house was surrounded. Armed men penetrated our property and took our house by assault, hitting it in a brutal and terrible manner, firing with heavy weapons against the front wall of our residence.”

Hector Reyes, whose house is approximately 300 feet from that of Ojeda Rios, confirmed this account, saying that the US assault team began firing on the house as soon as the helicopters arrived on the scene. “The first shots were very powerful, not from a little revolver like they say he had,” said Reyes.

The killing sparked spontaneous demonstrations throughout the island and statements of condemnation by leaders of virtually every political tendency, from pro-independence to the supporters of the island’s status as a US “commonwealth” and those advocating US statehood.

Even the territory’s Governor Anibal Acevedo Vila, whose Popular Democratic Party supports the island’s current colonial status, found himself compelled to declare his “deep indignation” and demand an explanation from the FBI for the killing of Ojeda. “As governor, I make an energetic demand to the federal authorities to end the silence that they have maintained in relation to these events,” he said.

Neither the governor nor the Puerto Rican police and local prosecutors were given any advance notice that the FBI was about to mount a military operation on the island. They first learned of the siege from news

reports and received no official report from the FBI until nearly a full day later. An FBI spokesman claimed that the silence owed to the fact that the operation was “developing” and the agency feared endangering its agents.

The head of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico, Monsignor Roberto Gonzalez Nieves, also condemned the killing, warning that it would “continue the cycle of violence.”

“They are operating as if they were in hostile territory, like Iraq or Afghanistan,” said Radio Isla political commentator Ignacio Rivera. “It has political consequences,” added Rivera, a supporter of statehood for Puerto Rico. “They achieved their military objective, but the political side was absurd.”

The half-hearted protests from the island’s establishment were a timid reflection of the popular outrage the killing has provoked throughout Puerto Rico.

There were demands on the island for the declaration of a day of national mourning for Ojeda. The University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, the island’s largest campus with 23,000 students, announced that students would be excused from classes and university employees given the day off to attend the nationalist leader’s funeral Tuesday.

In a press release, the university’s president, Gladys Escalona de Motta, stated, “I call on the university community, in an exercise of its free expression, to set a high example in these moments when the nation demands clarity.” She added, “Puerto Rico needs to take stock of its convictions to confront the feelings that have overcome the country.”

The FBI chose as the day to carry out the assassination the 137th anniversary of the “Grito de Lares,” the first revolt for Puerto Rican independence from Spain. The day is celebrated each year as a commemoration of the Puerto Rican national struggle against colonialism.

It appears likely that the day was chosen based on the belief that Ojeda Rios would more likely be alone, as his sympathizers and supporters would be marking the day with public meetings and demonstrations. The Puerto Rican nationalist leader recorded messages that were read out in Lares every year. Ironically, his last message was broadcast even as federal agents were moving in to kill him.

Many, however, saw the choice of the day as a political statement by Washington of impunity and contempt for the sentiments of the Puerto Rican people.

An autopsy performed at the San Juan Institute of Forensic Sciences confirmed the sadistic character of the FBI’s assassination of Ojeda Rios. It showed that he suffered a single bullet wound entering beneath his collarbone and exiting his back.

“He did not die instantaneously,” said Doctor Hector Pesquera, who participated in the autopsy. “What I saw as a doctor was that they let him bleed to death.... In my opinion, there was enough time, a considerable time in which he was wounded and he did not receive the aid that could have saved his life.”

Puerto Rico’s Justice Secretary, Roberto Sanchez Ramos, concurred with this assessment, stating, “The information we have is that if Mr. Ojeda had received immediate medical attention after being shot, he would have survived.”

Ojeda Rios had been the subject of a similar FBI raid involving helicopters and scores of agents in 1985, when he was arrested in connection with the Wells Fargo robbery. He was subsequently jailed and tried for attempted murder for shooting and wounding one of the FBI agents during the arrest. A federal jury in San Juan, however, found him not guilty, its members accepting his argument that he had acted in self-defense against the government’s aggression.

The FBI and other US authorities never forgave nor forgot this humiliation. Now they have taken advantage of changed political conditions in the US—characterized by the “global war on terrorism” and the USA Patriot Act—to murder him. Clearly, if the agency had wanted to arrest a 72-year-old man, accompanied only by his wife, they could have taken him alive.

The assassination of Ojeda is a case of Washington deploying a death squad on what it claims as its own territory. This brutal killing serves as a warning of the methods the US government is prepared to use to suppress political opposition within the US itself.

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