

Los Angeles Times: Friday, January 10, 1997. Re-printed by permission.

# **Not Guilty Pleas in Merchant's Death**

## **Crime:** Six men allegedly belonging to an extortion ring are charged with a Glendale shopkeeper's slaying.

By: EFRAIN HERNANDEZ JR.  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

GLENDALE-Six men charged with murder in the alleged attempted extortion of a Glendale merchant that left two men dead were themselves innocently caught in the middle of a dispute, defense lawyers said Thursday.

"It's a business dispute that escalated," said James E. Blatt, the lawyer representing defendant Mger Tagvoryan, 23, of North Hollywood. "This was not an extortion or attempted robbery."

The six defendants pleaded not guilty to murder, robbery and conspiracy charges at Glendale Municipal Court, on Thursday. Court Commissioner Daniel F. Calabro ordered them held without bail and scheduled a preliminary hearing Jan. 23.

The defendants were arrested after a shootout at the Mirage Clothing & Shoes store on Glendale Avenue on Dec. 17, in which two men died, one a teenage bystander.

Authorities continued to search for a seventh suspect, identified as Samuel Krboyan, 42, of Van Nuys.

The case immediately intensified ongoing concerns by local and federal authorities about possible Russian and Armenian extortion or related crimes in the region.

A few days after the shooting the Glendale Police Department created a hotline for tips-at (818) 548-2119 - and this week police launched a public awareness campaign specially designed to reach the city's immigrant communities.

But defense lawyers said outside the courtroom Thursday that their clients have nothing to do with organized crime or any extortion ring. As more evidence, including ballistics reports, becomes available, the truth about what happened at the clothing store that night will be revealed, they said.

Alex R. Kessel, who represents defendant Karen Tagvoryan, 22, of Van Nuys, said the store owner, whose name has been withheld because police fear for his safety, has not been candid with authorities.

"These people know each other. None of these gentlemen should be here for the crime of murder, said Kessel, who declined to elaborate. Several defense lawyers said they were eager to present their cases.

"We've got clients in custody. We're anxious to start getting the truth out," said Alan Baum, who represents defendant Gagik Kazarian, 44, of Glendale. "Things aren't what they seem."

Deputy Dist. Atty. Eleanor Hunter, who is handling the case, was unavailable for comment. The store owner, who has declined to talk about the case, did not return telephone calls Thursday.

Killed in the shootout shortly after 11:30 p.m. Dec. 17 were bystander Edmon Tokatlyan, 19, of Glendale and an alleged assailant, Artur Atayan, 27, of North Hollywood.

Several defense lawyers said it seemed that a heated argument led to the violence.

"In arguments people get angry," Kessel said.

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## **6 Extortion Suspects Are Cleared Courts: Judge dismisses murder, attempted robbery and conspiracy charges in alleged crime that set off gun battle.**

By: EFRAIN HERNANDEZ JR.  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

PASADENA-A Superior Court judge late Tuesday dismissed murder, attempted robbery and conspiracy charges against six suspects in an alleged extortion that set off a gun battle that left two men dead.

The case was tainted early on when it was learned that a Glendale merchant, who was allegedly the victim of a gang of extortionists, was himself on felony probation-making it illegal for him to possess the pistol he said he used to defend himself in the gunfight. His subsequent refusal to testify hampered the prosecution.

Judge Victor Person, responding to a pretrial motion by defense lawyers, ruled that a nine-day preliminary hearing in Glendale Municipal Court failed to provide the six men with a fair opportunity to present their defense.

Defense lawyers, although happy with the ruling, said their clients were re-arrested immediately and remained in custody without bail. It is likely that at least some of the men will be charged again, the lawyers said.

"It's a mixed victory," said Alex Kessel, the lawyer representing defendant Karen Tagvoryan, 22, of Van Nuys. "The prosecution has a right to re-file the case. . . we're anticipating a new arraignment."

Sandi Gibbons, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office, said it was undetermined whether prosecutors would re-file charges against the men. "The judge dismissed the case on a procedural ground," Gibbons said. "We will reevaluate and determine how we're going to proceed."

The judge's ruling was met with emotional applause by the defendant's relatives and friends, said James E. Blatt, the lawyer for defendant Mger Tagvoryan, 23, of North Hollywood. "It was a tough battle," Blatt said.

In February, Municipal Judge Laura Matz ended a nine-day preliminary hearing by ordering the six men to stand trial for their alleged roles in a late-night shootout at the Mirage Clothing & Shoes store on Glendale Avenue on Dec. 17.

Besides Tagvoryan and Tagvoryan, the defendants are Tagvoriyan's brother, Hovhanes Tagvoryan, 23, also of Van Nuys; Gagik Kazarian, 44, of Glendale; Khoren Broutian, 32, of Hollywood, and Hovik Interz, 36, of North Hollywood.

A seventh suspect, Samuel Krboyan, 42, of Van Nuys, remains at large.

The preliminary hearing was marked by intense legal maneuvering and complications, such as the prosecution's key witness refusing to testify.

According to Deputy Dist. Atty. Eleanor Hunter, who prosecuted the case, the defendants went to the clothing store sometime after 11 p.m. on Dec. 17 and pressured Ara Karapetian, the store owner, to pay \$3,000.

Karapetian refused to pay, authorities said, leading Artur Atayan, one of the alleged extortionists, to begin firing gunshots. Karapetian also used a gun, and the shootout resulted in the deaths of Atayan and a 19-year-old bystander, authorities said.

The prosecution encountered problems when the judge learned that Karapetian was on felony probation for robbery-making it illegal for him to possess a firearm.

The judge advised Karapetian to seek a lawyer, and when Karapetian returned to court the next day he invoked the right not to give testimony that would incriminate himself. And because defense lawyers could not cross-examine him, the judge struck his earlier testimony from the record as well.

Defense lawyers have said all along that the defendants were not trying to extort money from Karapetian. There was a business dispute that got out of control, they said.

"We were arguing that this wasn't a robbery," Kessel said. "This was an argument among men that escalated into a shooting."

Although none of the defendants were alleged to have used a gun, prosecutors and defense lawyers said they could face the death penalty if convicted because of the conspiracy charges.

Ronald D. Hedding, lawyer for Hovhanes Tagvoryan, said there was no evidence that the men were part of the Armenian Mafia or any other organized crime group. "There's been no evidence that's been brought out that shows any Armenian Mafia here," Hedding said.