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Reuters

Ex-Afghan central bank chief slain while driving cab

By Marty Graham

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SAN DIEGO: Forced by civil war from his post as governor of Afghanistan's central bank, Mir Najibullah Sadat Sahou was granted political asylum in the United States in 1992 after fighters in his native country seized his home.

Almost two decades later, the French-trained former economist turned full-time cabby and part-time TV commentator was shot to death while working a late-night shift driving his taxi in San Diego's upscale La Jolla community. He was 68.

Police investigating last month's still-unsolved murder have revealed little about the case except to say the slaying appears to have stemmed from a robbery of Sahou, presumably by a man who was a passenger in his cab at the time. Others are not so sure.

A woman who lives near the crime scene says she heard two men bickering loudly in a foreign language before three gunshots were fired, and she disbelieves robbery was a motive.

Some friends and associates of Sahou have raised questions about whether his views on the Afghan government and economy, as aired on a talk show he hosted on the Ariana-Afghanistan International TV network, may have cost him his life.

Nabil Miskinyar, who owns the Irvine, California-based TV channel, said Sahou's commentary for the bi-weekly show, "To Find the Truth," struck a very "neutral" tone, and he doubted the killing was political.

But he said homicide investigators asked Sahou's wife for a copy of her husband's final program, broadcast the week he died, focusing on the September 20 assassination of former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of the High Peace Council, at his home in Kabul.

Sahou ran the central bank under Rabbani and prior to his administration, Miskinyar said.

His daughter, Savitar Sahou, 26, said she is keeping an open mind about the investigation, though she acknowledges relatives are divided over whether to openly dispute the initial determination that Sahou's death was a robbery-murder.

WAITING FOR JUSTICE

"We are going to wait to get justice for my father," she told Reuters in an interview last week. "If I voice my opinion and say it was a robbery or a political assassination or a hate crime, it might make the investigation more difficult."

Either way, the slaying marks a tragic end to the story of a highly educated, once-powerful man from a strife-torn country forced by civil war to make a fresh start in the United States in a working-class occupation.

"What we have is a noble immigrant, a scholar, a father who was shot to death while he was trying to bring home food for his family," Savitar Sahou said. "He ... started over and worked very hard to make something of himself here."

Although Sahou eventually became a U.S. citizen, he maintained close ties with Afghanistan and was urged to return to his homeland to seek political office after the Taliban were driven from power, his daughter said. He chose instead to stay and build a new life in the United States.

With two older daughters and a son living in Germany, Sahou, his wife and their youngest daughter, Savitar, now studying in preparation for medical school, settled in the San Diego suburb of Poway.

Despite master's degrees in finance and economics from the Sorbonne in Paris, he was unable to find work in his field. He ultimately purchased a taxi cab and began working double shifts, though his daughter said he remained very much a scholar, reading during breaks on the job and writing poetry during rare moments of free time.

"My mom would pack him lunch in a picnic basket, and he left at 8 a.m., came home from work at 1 a.m.," his daughter recalled. "I tried to go clean his room, and all I found was books and writings everywhere."

A STRANGER AND AN ARGUMENT

Tragedy struck on September 28, at about 11:35 p.m., when, according to police, Sahou stopped his green-and-white cab along a street in La Jolla, and witnesses saw two men emerge from the vehicle.

A nearby resident, retired teacher Pat Sell, said she was awakened by male voices speaking in a foreign language.

"I heard a loud and angry argument," she said. "The one voice sounded like it was scolding. Then I heard two shots, and a few seconds later, a third shot."

Sell and other neighbors called the police, who found Sahou dead on the walkway. His taxi was discovered abandoned a few miles away, apparently driven there by Sahou's assailant.

No arrests have been made. San Diego police detective Brian Pendleton declined to discuss the case other than to say it was under investigation as a robbery-homicide, a notion strongly disputed by Sell.

"I never thought it was a robbery. I heard an argument, and then he was killed," Sell said.

Adding to doubts about robbery as a motive, friends and family were told at Sahou's funeral that his wallet and a ring were left behind by the killer, Miskinyar said.

If his role as a television commentator were to prove a factor in the slaying, it was not because Sahou had inflammatory opinions, the TV station owner said.

"He was against corruption, we are all against corruption," Miskinyar said. "But he was very wise and neutral, not a hot-head like me."