

Officers Now Believe at Least 6 Killings Are Linked to 1 Man

By DAVID FREED and MARK ARAX, *Times Staff Writers*

The March 17 shooting death of a 35-year-old woman in her Rosemead condominium may have been the first in a countywide series of at least six slayings linked to a killer who enters unlocked homes at night to attack his victims as they sleep, authorities said Friday.

Homicide detectives investigating the unsolved killings believe that the slaying of Dayle Okazaki and the wounding of her roommate, Maria Hernandez, may have started the series of fatal attacks.

Los Angeles County sheriff's officials said Hernandez, 25, escaped after being accosted and shot in the hand by an intruder as she returned to her home on the night of March 17. Deputies responding to her call for help found Okazaki's body on the kitchen floor.

"That was the first (murder) case that (detectives) were able to link," Sheriff's Capt. William R. Hinkle said Friday.

Series of Assaults

Deputies later arrested a Colombian national, Miguel Angel Paez, who was released from sheriff's custody soon afterward. He was not charged and "had an excellent alibi," Hinkle said.

The man who attacked Okazaki and Hernandez may be responsible for 12 or 13 slayings and more than 15 other rapes, beatings and kidnappings, authorities have said. Of the nearly 30 cases, seven, including six homicides, are believed to be definitely linked to the same man, Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block said.

Block said Friday that investigators have contacted the FBI in Washington to help prepare a psychological profile of the curly haired, gapped-tooth man who has been identified by survivors and witnesses of those seven cases.

Block noted that detectives this week received a "significant number" of telephone calls from people with information relating to the investigation after local newspapers published and television stations broadcast a police-issued drawing believed to resemble the killer.

However, Block had little hope of immediate progress in the case, and was grim when asked if he thought that the killer would strike again.

"There's nothing to think that he won't," Block said. "His intentions are to make it as difficult as possible for us."

Hinkle said investigators have been able to link the Okazaki slaying to the fatal beating June 2 in Monrovia of Mabel Bell, 84, and to the June 28 slaying in Arcadia of Patty Elaine Higgins, 32, whose throat was slashed. Other killings linked in the series include the June 2 throat slashing of Mary Cannon, 75, also in Arcadia; the shooting of Chainarong Khovanath, 32, at his home in Sun Valley; and Thursday's shooting of Elyas Abowath, 35, in his Diamond Bar bedroom.

Molestation Incidents

Investigators also believe that the non-fatal bludgeoning July 5 of a sleeping 16-year-old girl in Sierra Madre is linked to the same suspect, Hinkle said.

Meanwhile, police confirmed Friday that of the more than 15 brutal assaults being investigated, at least three include the kidnapping and sexual molestation of children. The abductions occurred during a three-week period beginning in February.

On Feb. 25, a 6-year-old Montebello girl was taken from a bus

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bench near Wilcox Elementary School while waiting for an older sister. The girl told police she was carried away in a zippered garment bag. She was later sexually assaulted and dropped off in the Silver Lake area.

Two weeks later, on March 11, a 9-year-old Monterey Park boy was kidnaped from his home at night by a man and sexually assaulted. The man then left the child in Elysian Park, which is near Silver Lake.

On March 20, an Eagle Rock girl was kidnaped and sexually molested by a man who had broken into the family home at night, officials said.

"Certain facts that come out of these kidnappings and sexual assaults of children appear to be part of the mode of operation he displayed in later assaults and homicides," said Detective Randy Thomas of the Montebello Police Department, which is part of a task force investigating the slayings and assaults.

Puzzling Factors

"They are being looked at as part of a series of assaults prior to the first homicide in Rosemead," he said.

Another high-ranking police officer said that although there are many similarities between the assaults and slayings, it is the dissimilarities that confound investigators.

"The strange part is that he doesn't meet any profile we've ever seen," said the officer, who spoke on the condition that he not be named. "Guys that have worked 15 to 20 years investigating homicides are pulling their hair out over this. They say this is the most perplexing case they've ever worked on."

Block said the police task force is continuing to grow in manpower, but he would not elaborate.

It is known that at least 25 detectives from seven agencies are working together on the case. Those agencies include the Sheriff's Department and police departments from Los Angeles, Arcadia, Glendale, Monrovia, Montebello and Monterey Park.