

Case involving raid on Laredo officials left with questions unanswered

LAREDO (AP) — More than a month after federal agents raided the Webb County district attorney's office and hauled away thousands of files in a moving truck, much of the case still is a mystery.

Starting on Friday, May 29, federal agents executed search warrants on the homes and offices of 14 Laredo officials and others, including District Attorney Joe Rubio, bail bondsman Jesse Castaneda and former state district judge Ruben Garcia. The home of Rubio's father also was searched.

Garcia pleaded guilty Tuesday to taking bribes for fixing court cases in connection with the federal probe.

But the 73-page affidavit used as the basis for issuing the search warrants remains sealed at prosecutors' request, and federal officials are saying little.

"There are ethical and legal constraints that keep me from commenting on an ongoing criminal investigation," Assistant U.S. Attorney Don DeGabielle, the lead prosecutor in the case, said. He has said the affidavit includes details about confidential sources, taped telephone conversations and witnesses who are cooperating with the government.

Rubio said he hopes for a rapid end to the probe investigating what happened to criminal charges against 128 people over the nine years he has been in office.

"I just hope that the investigation they're conducting is done as quickly as they possibly can, while protecting the rights of everyone involved," Rubio said.

DeGabielle was making no promises.

"It's difficult to say how long this investigation will take," he said.

Castaneda, the bail bondsman, told the *San Antonio Express-News* that not only were his home and office searched, but he was questioned for hours in San Antonio by

federal agents. Castaneda said agents had been on the case for three years and had bugged his house, office and bedroom.

Some light was shed on the case when one of its targets admitted wrongdoing. Garcia, the former judge, pleaded guilty to conspiring with an unnamed assistant district attorney and others to fix the outcome of his clients' criminal cases in exchange for bribes.

Rubio, meanwhile, is criticizing the way the raid was handled.

He said carting 5,000 files from his office in moving trucks was unnecessary because federal agencies always have been allowed to make

copies of whatever they needed. "A lot of this information was readily available to federal agencies upon request," Rubio said. "I don't think that the far-reaching warrant was necessary and the fact that it was carried out in a sensationalized manner was not necessary either."

But DeGabielle said it is standard procedure to take files, make copies and return them as soon as possible.

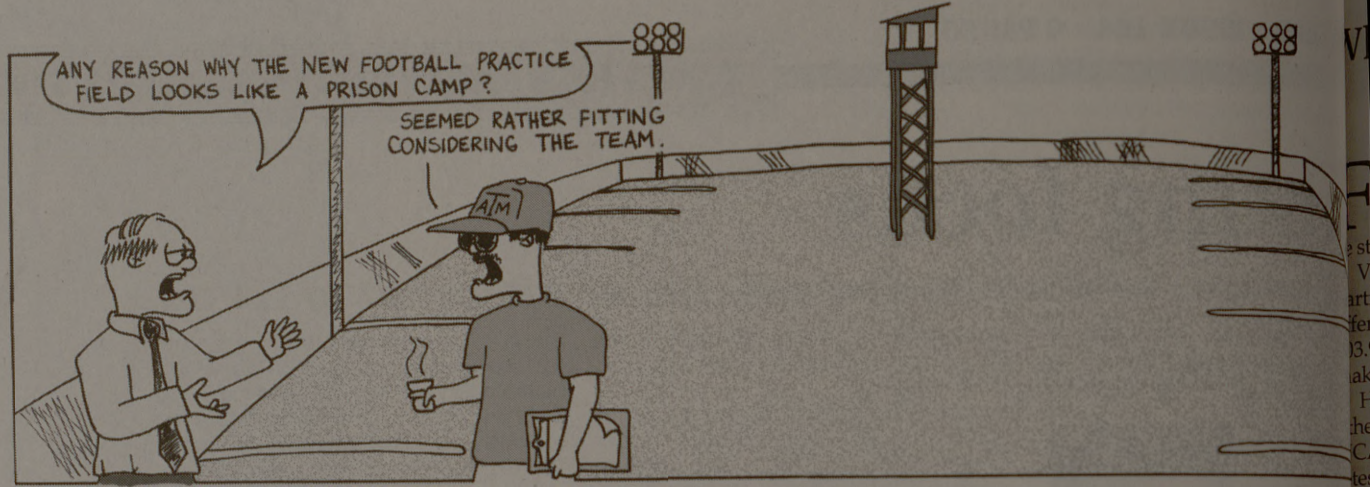
"The search warrant was executed over a weekend to provide a minimum of disruption for the office," he said.

Theories about the probe have run rampant since the raids. Some speculate that it is retaliation for Rubio's decision last October to stop prosecuting minor drug cases for the federal government.

Rubio said he stopped the long-standing practice of handling federal drug cases involving amounts under 50 kilos because his office was handling about 750 cases a year to the tune of \$1 million. He said the federal government would not pay incarceration costs.

"There's a lot of feathers that were ruffled in the U.S. attorney's office," Rubio said, although he added that he could not speculate if that incident has anything to do with the federal investigation.

Sketch



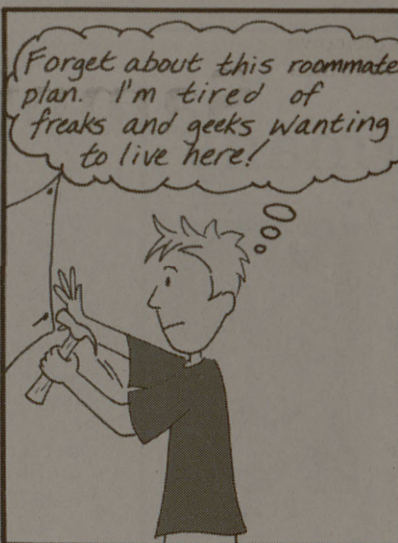
By Quatro

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Southern Blacklands zone considered for cotton producer's problems with boll weevils

HOUSTON (AP) — Cotton producers in a 65-county swath across much of east and central Texas have through today to comment to the Texas Department of Agriculture on whether to create a Southern Blacklands zone in the state's boll weevil eradication program.

A proposal before the TDA would simply create a

zone, but would not install an eradication program, which requires a vote of producers in the region.

Growers in the regions roughly surrounding Abilene and San Angelo already have approved organized insect control programs aimed at the cotton-destroying pests.

Growers in a region stretching from Lubbock to

Midland rejected it last year.

Farmers and landowners in counties that have the program pay a per-acre assessment to fund it.

The referendum was established by a law passed last year that corrected a constitutional problem found by the Texas Supreme Court with the previous statewide boll weevil eradication program.

Texas tornado brings Fourth of July celebration to a halt

ROUND ROCK, Texas (AP) — A twister that forced Central Texans at a July Fourth barbecue to take cover has injured some horses and damaged buildings.

Workers at the Forrest Creek Stables near Round Rock and more than two dozen friends at the barbecue wit-

nessed the twister's descent from the clouds Saturday.

"We screamed tornado and we ran," B.J. Slover, who runs the ranch, told Austin television station KTBC.

The tornado peeled off the stable's roof and overturned trailers. Some hors-

es were hurt by flying debris. Residents who took shelter in a room were uninjured.

"We all got in the tub and kids (were) crying," Carol Wallen, another witness said. "And we ran out and saw the flying in circles."

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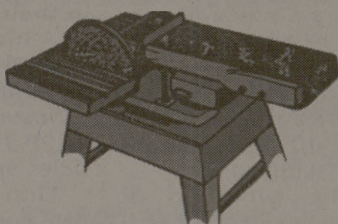
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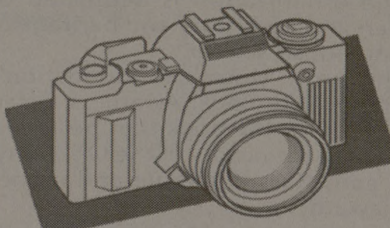
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