

Mexico jails alleged cartel gunman implicated in cardinal's murder

MEXICO CITY - An alleged drug-cartel gunman implicated in the 1993 murder of Cardinal Juan Posadas Ocampo of Guadalajara, Mexico, has been sentenced to 11 years in prison after being found guilty of weapons-related offenses.

The office of Mexican Attorney General Medina Mora said in a July 26 statement that Alfredo Araujo Avila - known as "El Popeye" - was convicted of possessing a cache of illegal weapons. The weapons used in the cardinal's slaying were among those found in Araujo's possession, the statement said.

Araujo was arrested Jan. 25, 2008, in Tijuana, where he allegedly worked as a gunman for one of the city's numerous drug cartels. He also has been charged with the murder of a local newspaper editor.

The conviction marks one of the few developments in the case, which Catholic officials said has been characterized by inept investigations and a lack of political will to uncover the truth. The murder ushered in immense social and political change in western Mexico, but still provokes outrage nationwide 16 years later. The case long has been the domain of conspiracy theories.

Araujo is currently the only person implicated in the murder to be sentenced to prison.

Mexican authorities maintain that Cardinal Posadas - who was wearing his clerical robes at the time of his death - was caught in the crossfire of a shootout between members of rival cartels May 24, 1993, at the Guadalajara airport, where he went to greet Archbishop Giralamo Prigione, papal nuncio to Mexico. The shootout also

claimed the lives of the cardinal's chauffeur and five gunmen. Cartel activities were widespread in the Guadalajara area during the early 1990s.

Church officials reject the theory that "confusion" reigned that day at the airport and consider the murder a "state crime." They have demanded that former President Carlos Salinas - who governed from 1988 to 1994 - give a more detailed explanation of the circumstances surrounding the murder.

The spokesman for the Archdiocese of Guadalajara, Father Adalberto Gonzalez, told Catholic News Service July 27 that the judicial action against Araujo "doesn't prove a thing" since no evidence of the gunman's involvement in the cardinal's murder has been offered.

"All they did was find a cache of weapons," Father Gonzalez said.

"No one has ever been convicted or sentenced for the cardinal's murder," he added.