

Jury clears Puerto Rico police in Marine's beating

By Mike Melia, Associated Press Writer

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[Defense attorney Lorenzo J. Palomares, left, walks with one of his clients defendant police officer Lt. Johnny Cruz Gonzalez, after a day in the trial of Cruz Gonzales and two other police officers, in front of the Federal Court Building, in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Tuesday, March 24, 2009. Cruz Gonzalez, and the others, Luis Diaz Ruiz and Karimar Peraza Salgado, were acquitted by a jury of federal civil rights charges in the beating of Dominican-born U.S. Marine Yonatta Crispin during a baseball game in 2007. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley) (/ AP)]

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — A jury acquitted three Puerto Rican police officers of federal civil rights charges Friday in the beating of a Dominican-born U.S. Marine at a baseball game between the two Caribbean rivals.

Sgt. Yonatta Crispin said the officers used metal batons and insulted him with ethnic slurs. His only provocation, he said, was to wear a cap with a Dominican flag insignia to the raucous 2007 game against the Puerto Rico squad.

But the jury rejected arguments that the officers used excessive force.

"He was drunk and rowdy, and he had to be taken out of the stadium," said Michael Corona, an attorney for one of the officers. "This had nothing to do with nationality."

The seven-day trial highlighted long-running claims of police brutality toward Dominicans -- allegations raised more typically by undocumented migrants who fill the ranks of low-paying jobs in this more affluent U.S. Caribbean territory.

Crispin, a 32-year-old Iraq war veteran who was born in the Dominican Republic and currently works as a Marine recruiter in Puerto Rico, called the verdict a defeat for the rights of Dominicans.

"Now the police have got a green light to assault Dominicans and get away with it," he said. "It's not only about me, it's about the Dominican community."

The scuffle came in the late innings of a Caribbean Series match on Feb. 4, 2007, with the Dominican national team well on its way to a 12-0 victory.

Some in the crowd of more than 20,000 were throwing beer bottles at police. Officers responding to a complaint about the fans in one section of the Roberto Clemente Stadium in Carolina, just outside San Juan, confronted a friend of Crispin and ordered both men to leave.

As police forced Crispin out of the stadium, he said he only raised his hands in protest and shouted he was a Marine. But the police said the burly, 6-foot-5 Crispin put up a fight. With jeering fans crowding around them, defense lawyers said the officers did what was needed to keep the situation under control.

An official from the Dominican consulate who attended the game, Mirtha de Moya, testified that she tried to intervene as officers beat Crispin and an officer told her: "They do worse in your country."

The three defendants -- Lt. Johnny Cruz Gonzalez, Sgt. Luis Diaz Ruiz and agent Karimar Peraza Salgado -- were cleared of charges that they used unreasonable force and then conspired to cover it up by filing false police reports and lying to investigators.

Crispin received nine stitches for a gash in his head. He denied he was drunk. Police arrested him on a military installation days after the incident for assault, but those charges were dismissed in local court.

Crispin says he will now press his allegations in a civil suit.

The suit pending before U.S. district court claims police in Carolina were following an unspoken policy to systematically harass and intimidate Dominicans -- allegations denied by police. The officers' attorneys say the suit is a baseless grab for profit.

Dominicans are the island's largest foreign-born group, numbering more than 80,000 on this territory of 4 million people. Many risk their lives coming here on homemade wooden boats with new arrivals taking low-paying jobs in construction, coffee-picking and domestic service.

Community advocates say Crispin's case fits a pattern. In a report to the island's government in October, the consulate described 15 recent cases of police beating Dominican migrants. It says rogue police prey on undocumented people who would be afraid to report the abuse, often delivering migrants to federal authorities for deportation.

Corona, an attorney for Peraza, said the testimony for the defense by some Dominican witnesses proves the case was not about ethnic bias.

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