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TRUMP USES LOCAL KILLING TO JUSTIFY IMMIGRATION CRACKDOWN

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WASHINGTON — When a Fairfax County jury convicted Wilmer Sanchez-Serrano last November for his role in the stabbing death of 15-year-old Watkins Mill High School student Damaris A. Reyas Rivas one year before, one might have reasonably assumed Rivas' loved ones could put her tragic death behind them and, with at least one of her killers behind bars, begin to heal.

But in their quest to overhaul the nation's immigration laws, the Trump administration returned Rivas to the headlines Wednesday when Acting Assistant Attorney General John Cronan invoked her name at a White House law enforcement roundtable on MS-13, the gang to which Sanchez-Serrano – as well as the other 10 suspects arrested in connection with her death – claimed membership.

"In January of last year, Damaris Reyes Rivas, a 15-year-old girl from a suburb of D.C., was stabbed 13 times with knives and a wooden stake by MS-13 members," Cronan said, while briefing President Donald Trump, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, Secretary of Homeland Security Kirsten Nielsen, and several members of Congress. "Damaris's killers filmed her murder so that they could show their leaders back in El Salvador, and Damaris's body was then barbarically dumped next to railroad tracks that run under the Beltway," he said.

When Cronan explained to reporters how he "briefed the president on a few examples of MS-13's brutality" later that afternoon, he once again spoke of Reyes Rivas, and again recounted how she

"was stabbed 13 times with knives and a wooden stake" before being "savagely dumped next to railroad tracks under the same road, the Beltway that many of us take to work every day.

Cronan's appearances at both the roundtable and the press briefing were only the latest example of Trump administration figures – including the president himself – using the specter of MS-13 – which draws its members from the Salvadoran community – to justify revoking the Temporary Protected Status of some 200,000 Salvadorans living in the United States and severely curtailing the number of refugees allowed into the country – including unaccompanied minors. President Trump has also demanded the repeal of the Diversity Visa Program "lottery" which allows persons from countries that do not send many people to the United States to receive immigrant visas without sponsorship from an employer and family member, and the repeal of the parts of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that provide immigrant visas for family reunification purposes, derisively referred to by anti-immigration activists as "chain migration."

"The reason they [MS-13] have 10,000 members in 40 states and the District of Columbia is...loopholes in our immigration laws and...porous borders," Cronan said.

George Escobar, Senior Director of Human Services at CASA, an immigration advocacy group, said that the "inflammatory rhetoric" around MS-13 used by Cronan and other members of the Trump administration is not only unhelpful, but part of a strategy to demonize nonwhite immigrants and justify drastic curbs on legal immigration

"This is straight from their playbook – anytime there are opportunities for serious discussions on how to fix our broken immigration system, the administration begins to focus on a minute, small part of the immigrant community," Escobar said. "This is all part of their strategy – they want to put the MS-13 issue front and center in any discussion having to do with a fix for [the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program] and use that as an excuse to put really ridiculous policies together that separate families and don't do anything to address the crisis we're facing right now."

But while local law enforcement officials acknowledge violent crime perpetrated by members of MS-13 – whose motto translates to "Kill, Rape, Control," – is a real problem, they say the hardline rhetoric used by President Trump and others creates a climate of fear in the communities that are best situated to assist law enforcement in combating gangs like MS-13.

"Getting witnesses to come forward in gang-related prosecutions has been a challenge for many years," said Montgomery County Police Chief Thomas Manger, who stressed that his department works "relentlessly" to earn the trust of immigrant communities, and that work has resulted in successful prosecutions of gang members.

"In the cases involving transnational gangs, fear of the gang and fear of deportation are both factors that make some witnesses reluctant to come forward," Manger said.

Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office Public Affairs Director Ramon Korionoff said that State's Attorney John McCarthy "has long made it a priority of his office to gain, maintain and secure the trust of the community, especially those in our community who are recently arrived or have emigrated here to build a productive life for themselves and their families."

Korionoff stressed that victims are victims and witnesses are witnesses no matter their country of origin or immigration status, and witnesses in particular are "an important crime-fighting tool and are a pillar to the criminal justice system."

For police and prosecutors to do their best we must secure cooperation and testimony from witnesses – they help us to hold criminals accountable," he said. "If these witnesses do not trust law enforcement it makes our jobs harder."

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