

Dominican merchants blast 'cancer' in Police Department

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TAINTED JUSTICE

Dominican community leaders and merchants expressed outrage yesterday over what they characterized as a "criminal enterprise within the Police Department" and called on Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey to assure them he'll root out corrupt officers.

"This is a cancer that has to be taken seriously and treated aggressively," said Pedro Rodriguez

of United Neighbors Against Drugs.

Rodriguez's fury grew out of a *Daily News* investigation that uncovered allegations that Officer Jeffrey Cujdik and other narcotics officers destroyed or cut the wires to surveillance cameras during store raids.

The officers said they were in search of drug paraphernalia, specifically little plastic bags. But the store owners said that after the video-surveillance system in

their stores was disabled, they discovered that thousands of dollars in cash and merchandise was missing. The *Daily News* interviewed 14 store owners, independently, all of whom leveled similar accusations.

Seven more store owners came forward after the newspaper's March 20 "Tainted Justice: Smash & Grab" report, according to Danilo Burgos, president of the city's 300-member Dominican Grocers Association.

Burgos said he referred the store owners to a federal and local task force that was launched to investigate allegations that Cujdik lied on search-warrant applications to gain access to suspected drug homes and that he became too close to informants.

The probe expanded to include store raids by Cujdik and other squad members. A video of one raid, obtained by the *Daily News*, can be seen on philly.com. It shows Cujdik and other officers using either their bare hands or a bread knife and pliers to disable the surveillance system of West

Oak Lane store owner Jose Duran.

The store owners, including Duran, were charged with misdemeanors and spent thousands of dollars in legal fees.

"None of these people should have spent half a day in jail over these bull--- charges," Burgos said.

In a letter sent to Ramsey yesterday, Dominican leaders said the fact that store owners were willing to come forward, even

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though they fear retaliation from police, "indicates that the problem of police abuse has reached a boiling point."

Ramsey said he will meet with them as soon as possible.

"They've got some concerns and I'm more than happy to talk about it," he said.

"There will be a thorough investigation into the whole situation."

City Council member Maria Quinones-Sanchez said the Dominican community "should be upset and concerned."

"I want to make sure we have a process so folks can come forward without fear of retaliation on the part of the Police Department," she said.

Rodriguez said he was appalled that the officers seen cutting camera wires in Duran's video are still on the street.

Ramsey said the task force needs time to complete its investigation. Cujdik remains on desk duty, and last week Ramsey approved a move to split up officers who had worked with Cujdik into other squads.

"That's just shuffling the deck," Rodriguez said. "It's window dressing." ★

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