

to call his brother for ransom money, to be wired to a bank account in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

After his family sent \$89,598, Mikhel, Kadamovas and Altmanis suffocated Umansky.

After Umansky's body was dumped in the same Northern California lake as Muscatel and Pekler, Mikhel arranged for an unknown suspect to contact Umansky's family to demand more money.

It was eventually wired back to the United States to the bank account of Designed Water World, an upscale aquarium business in Encino run by Mikhel and Kadamovas.

Mikhel and Kadamovas then turned their attention back to Safiev, according to prosecutors and court documents. Prosecutors also allege that on Jan. 18 of this year, Natalya Solovyeva—who was Kadamovas' girlfriend—lured Kharabadze to Designed Water World, where several of the suspects forced him to call Safiev to ask him to come.

Safiev arrived alone.

Over the next few days, the kidnapers forced Safiev to call a business associate in London to transfer \$969,000 from his Singapore account to a Miami account.

On Jan. 25, both Safiev and Kharabadze were killed.

Six days later, one or more of the alleged kidnapers called Safiev's business associate to demand \$4 million more in ransom.

Although Muscatel's body was pulled from the Northern California lake Oct. 18, six days after he was reported missing to Los Angeles police, his body was not identified until March, when authorities went looking for the others in the deep, frigid waters of the Gold Country lake.

That month, they found the bodies of Pekler, Safiev, Kharabadze and Umansky.

Times staff writer Andrea Pereira contributed to this report.

or calling pool maintenance companies, trying to find explanations, McCarthy said.

Commanders were trying out unfamiliar terms such as "suspended particulates" and "turbidity" as they tried to explain what happened—not only to the public, but to themselves.

"I find it baffling," said Capt. Richard Wemmer. "It's just utterly amazing.... The consensus is that everyone thought they

Many officers later returned to the pool, he said. One skeptical lieutenant even went back three separate times to make sure, Wemmer said. But police also acknowledged that only in hindsight does it seem clear that the pool warranted extra scrutiny. They describe an investigation that quickly moved in other directions, away from the scenario of a possible drowning.

Certain that they were seeing

sex offenders in the neighborhood, calling in bloodhounds, appealing to the public for leads.

And in a point that was to later prove critical, McCarthy said that no one seems to remember seeing a drain at the bottom of the pool, or any other object to mar what appeared to be a smooth, light-colored surface.

After a pool maintenance man put chemicals into the pool and the body was subsequently dis-

tive protocols? Do we need to create other protocols?"

The parents of the boy said Thursday they will file a lawsuit against the party's hosts but not the police.

The Ayalas spoke to reporters at their Beverly Hills apartment, thanking those who helped search for their son.

Wemmer was contrite.

"I am so sorry the family had to suffer as long as they did."

Police Win Bias Suit Against County

Courts: Jury rules the 500-plus public safety officers, who are mostly minorities, were discriminated against. Appeal seen as likely.

By HECTOR BECERRA
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A Superior Court jury Thursday unanimously decided that Los Angeles County has racially discriminated against members of its Office of Public Safety, a 500-plus member police force that patrols county hospitals, parks and other facilities.

Lawyers for the force, which is about 80% black, Latino and Asian, will ask for more than \$100 million in salary increases, back pay and pension funds during the next phase of the trial.

The officers argued that the county has operated a law-enforcement caste system in which public safety officers were paid 40% less than sheriff's deputies and were denied pensions equivalent to that of deputies. The county officers risk their lives and health and have even died performing their jobs but have historically been ridiculed as

"wannabe sheriffs" and treated like security guards, plaintiffs said.

They pointed out that county lifeguards get pension benefits similar to those of police or firefighters, but county police are among the few peace officers who do not.

Pending a judge's ruling on the financial damages—and a likely appeal—the civil verdict caps a nearly century-long dysfunctional relationship between county government and its largely anonymous police force, which was created in 1917 as a group of night watchmen. Over the years, the force evolved from armed security guards to unarmed security officers and finally to full-fledged peace officers. The force was consolidated in 1997 with the merger of officers who worked in county hospitals, parks and government buildings.

During a two-week trial, plaintiffs' attorneys argued that the officers have battled street gangs, restrained often-violent psychiatric patients and lost six officers in the line of duty, but they have been compensated more like security guards than police. The lawyers told the jury that the pay policy was discriminatory.

"I think the jury, a cross-section of people from Los Angeles

County, saw very clearly the institutional racism," said Jack O'Donnell, an attorney for the public safety officers. "I thank God the jury has taken the county to task."

An attorney for the county countered that emotional jurors returned a flat-out-wrong verdict.

"I understand the emotional connection that they felt for the officers, and that they felt they should be paid more, but the verdict reinforces that they weren't deciding on the basis of instructions, but on emotions," attorney Calvin House said. "I'm convinced the county did not discriminate on the basis of race."

O'Donnell said the county could have saved at least \$35 million in potential penalties had it settled the case rather than going to trial.

"We gave the county opportunities to settle and set the record straight about these officers, and they never made the effort," he said.

But House and county officials said the officers were asking for too much, especially given the county's financial straits.

"They've been saying they want to be paid the same as deputies. That by itself is a huge economic undertaking," House said. "With the current state of the budget, it

would have been hard to settle, given the numbers."

An aide to Supervisor Mike Antonovich defended the county's handling of salary negotiations.

"The Office of Public Safety does not patrol the same kind of area that sheriff's deputies do," Jean Huston said. "Patrolling a county park is different from patrolling South-Central Los Angeles."

House said the county will ask Superior Court Judge Victor Chavez to throw out the verdict, and failing that, will probably appeal.

O'Donnell said county police officers patrol some of the tensest, most volatile places in Los Angeles. At County-USC Medical Center, officers respond to violent psychiatric patients more than a dozen times a day, O'Donnell said. Rival gang members sometimes clash in the hospital, officers say.

"The county wants their cake and to eat it too. They knew they needed police officers to do these jobs, they just didn't want to pay cop wages and benefits," said Patricia Bellasalma, another attorney for the officers. "If they could have gotten away with having security guards, they would have."

Times staff writer Garrett Thero contributed to this report.