

Modesto Bee

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ALL EDITION

METH LAB FOUND IN HILMAR

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DATELINE: HILMAR

A bizarre shrine dedicated to a macabre deity of death greeted investigators who reported finding a small methamphetamine operation inside a residence Wednesday.

Merced County sheriff's deputies discovered the meth operation at a home in the 19000 block of First Street.

Deputies were at the home responding to a possible domestic violence call, according to deputy Tom MacKenzie, sheriff's spokesman.

After responding to the scene, deputies discovered that a 36-year-old woman had been stabbed, along with a 48-year-old male relative. Both victims were taken to a hospital and treated. The woman remains in critical condition, while the man was released.

Sheriff's detectives learned the woman had gotten into an argument earlier Wednesday with her boyfriend of 10 years, Jesus Ortega, 38. Later that night, Ortega returned and let himself into the residence with his key. Another argument erupted and the woman tried leaving with her two teenage daughters, MacKenzie said.

Ortega then stabbed the victim outside the residence, MacKenzie said. When the woman's relative tried to intervene, he was also stabbed. Ortega then left the scene.

After deputies responded to the home, evidence of drug use and manufacturing was discovered. Agents with the Merced/Mariposa High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area were called to process the scene.

Inside the home, agents found about \$5,000 in methamphetamine, in addition to several canisters of acetone and other chemicals used for meth production.

Agents also found a shrine dedicated to Santa Muerte -- a deity that is venerated in some parts of Mexico. The shrine included numerous statues of Santa Muerte, including one that was about 2 feet high.

Santa Muerte is a cloaked skeleton figure who carries a scythe, similar in appearance to the Grim Reaper. Agents said it's not uncommon for drug traffickers to worship Santa Muerte, and statues of the deity have been discovered in drug operations before.

The Hilmar case led investigators to another meth lab in the 1000 block of Mitchell Road in the Turlock area. The lab was discovered in a barn on the property. Agents were processing the scene Thursday evening and few details were available.

MacKenzie said it's unknown whether the labs in Hilmar and Turlock are connected.

Ortega may be traveling to Mexico in a white two-door car, possibly a Honda Accord, MacKenzie said.

Investigators are asking anyone information about his whereabouts to call 385-7472. Calls are kept confidential, and you can remain anonymous.