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SERIES: FAILURE TO PROVIDE: Los Angeles County's Child Support Crisis. First in a series

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FRUSTRATION AND RAGE;
'I AM THE VICTIM. I NEVER ASKED FOR ONE PENNY FROM ANYBODY. . . . THEN THEY CAME AND
TOOK THE \$10,000. THEY TOOK EVERYTHING.'

BYLINE: GREG KRIKORIAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI, TIMES STAFF WRITERS

BODY:

During 30 years as a prosecutor, facing down mobsters and street thugs, thrill killers and assorted sociopaths, Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti never felt as threatened as he did last year by a silver-haired handyman from Brazil.

He said as much last year during the trial of 57-year-old Roberto Lansing, who sent several menacing letters to Garcetti after his \$ 10,000 life savings was wrongly seized in a child support dispute.

After being convicted of threatening Garcetti, and only days after his release from state prison last month, Lansing said he had no choice but to write his letters.

"I have thought that over a thousand times," Lansing said in an interview from his small home in Hollywood. "There was nothing else I could do."

More than a few fathers--and mothers--who have dealt with Garcetti's Bureau of Family Support Operations understand how someone could be driven to extremes.

"People are going to start doing desperate things," said Charles McCormick, who was billed for nearly \$ 30,000 in back support even though a civil lawsuit was settled to forgive the debt.

The issue took months to resolve, McCormick said.

"I spent seven years in the Marine Corps, and I used to have so much pride and respect in this government," he

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said. "But now I am disgusted. . . . This ain't the America that I defended."

Critics and even some of his own employees say that Garcetti's child support program has created such strong feelings among those who feel they have been wronged that violence is a real concern.

"Somebody's going to put a bomb in our office one of these days," one caseworker said half-jokingly.

Garcetti declined to comment on any threats.

Lansing's arrest--and his conviction at the second of two trials--came after he sent two furious letters about Garcetti--one to the district attorney's office and the other to state Atty. Gen. Dan Lungren, whose office prosecuted the case.

In Lansing's first trial, in which a jury deadlocked 11-1 in favor of conviction, Garcetti testified that he genuinely feared for his safety and that of his family after being told of the letters, which included references to "murder." In all of his years as a prosecutor, Garcetti testified, he was never aware of a more direct threat to his life.

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But then and now, Lansing said he never really meant to harm the district attorney. "I was angry. . . . But I never would attack the man," said Lansing, the only person ever convicted of threatening Garcetti.

Instead, Lansing said, his letters were aimed at drawing attention to an oversight that threatened his existence.

Court testimony and records show that years after he and his wife divorced, she asked Garcetti's office for help in 1993 in collecting child support for the Lansings' only daughter, who was then 16.

But after Lansing satisfied that support order, and his wife withdrew her claim, he continued to receive bills for as much as \$ 37,000. The final straw, he said, came in April of last year when the state seized his bank account.

By that time, Lansing told detectives in a taped interview played at his trial that he had made about 500 calls to the district attorney's office, hoping it would intervene with the state to protect his life savings.

When that did not happen, he said, he lost all patience and felt in danger of losing his mind. And so, he said, he wrote the letters.

"I had to fight for my rights. I felt like . . . I can't let his organization run away with my money ," Lansing said.

After his arrest focused attention on his case, the error was recognized and Lansing's money was returned as he sat in jail.

Since his release from state prison, where he served almost five months after nearly a year in County Jail, Lansing has focused on getting back to his life.

"I am the victim," a frustrated Lansing said. "I never asked for one penny from anybody. . . . Then they came and took the \$ 10,000. They took everything . . . and they have many cases like this."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Roberto Lansing, in his Hollywood home, was jailed for sending threatening letters to Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti. He said he sent the letters after his \$10,000 life savings was wrongly seized.

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