

Suspect in Novack slaying, possibly cooperating, misses court date

A second man suspected of killing Florida millionaire Ben Novack Jr. at the Hilton Rye Town may be cooperating with federal authorities in their case against Novack's widow and brother-in-law.

Joel Gonzalez was a no-show Thursday at a status conference in U.S. District Court in White Plains, and lawyers for other defendants said that might be because he had already pleaded guilty.

"Based on my experience the government has probably made a deal with him, more likely than not a guilty plea and a cooperation agreement," Stephen Lewis, lawyer for Cristobal Veliz, Novack's brother-in-law, said after the conference.

Veliz and his sister, Nancy Novack, are charged with interstate domestic violence, accused of setting up the July 12, 2009, slaying at the hotel in Rye Brook.

Another defendant, Denis Ramirez, also is charged and is alleged to have helped bring the killers to the hotel.

Authorities have said that Nancy Novack let Gonzalez and another man into the hotel suite that morning and watched as they beat her husband to death with dumbbells.

She is accused of giving them a pillow to muffle his screams and urging them to finish him off by cutting out his eyes.

Ben Novack Jr. was the son of the founder of Miami Beach's famed Fontainebleau Hotel and owned Convention Concepts Unlimited. He and his wife were at the Hilton Rye Town that weekend organizing a convention for Amway, their biggest client.

Gonzalez's absence was not discussed during the court session Thursday, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Elliot Jacobson would not say why Gonzalez wasn't in court or comment on Lewis' speculation. Mary Anne Wirth, Gonzalez's lawyer, did not return telephone calls.

The case was put off until April 8 after Jacobson told U.S. District Judge Kenneth Karas that a grand jury is

continuing to hear evidence and there soon could be a superseding indictment.

If there is an additional indictment, it likely would add charges related to the April 2009 death of Ben Novack's mother, who was found in a pool of blood with a severe head wound in her Fort Lauderdale home.

Bernice Novack's death initially was ruled an accident by the Broward County medical examiner, but it was reclassified a homicide last year after the investigation into her son's killing.

Jacobson has said that Nancy Novack and Veliz set up that attack as well, as it furthered the same financial motive as killing Ben Novack.

At the time of the arrests in the summer of 2010, prosecutors revealed that the man they suspected of killing Ben Novack with Gonzalez had pleaded guilty and was cooperating.

That man has never been identified, and the defense lawyers said Thursday they still have not been told who he is. The prospect of both suspects in the killing cooperating with prosecutors did not seem to bother Lewis and Nancy Novack's lawyer, Howard Tanner.

"Whatever it is (Gonzalez has) admitted, if he's admitted anything, I don't believe that he will hurt my client because my client continues to assert her innocence," he said.

"People will say whatever they want to say if it gives

them a benefit and it fits the prosecution's case," Lewis said. "That doesn't necessarily mean they're telling the truth."