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# Motel Owner Convicted in 4 Slayings

Jury deadlocks on the same murder charges against the Valley man's brother. Prosecutors said a business dispute led to the killings.

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A jury convicted a Studio City motel owner Tuesday of murdering four members of a family in a business dispute, but deadlocked on the same capital murder charges against his brother.

Virendra "Victor" Govin, 37, faces the death penalty for the Hollywood Hills slayings. His business partner, Pravin "Peter" Govin, 34, is scheduled to return to court June 1 for a possible retrial.

"Justice has been served, that's for sure," Harish Patel, who was related to the victims, said after the guilty verdict was returned.

The jury deliberated for nearly four weeks on the killings of Patel's wife, Gita Kumar, 42; her son, Paras Kumar, 18; her daughter, Tulsi Kumar, 16, and her mother-in-law, Sitaben Patel, 63. The victims were strangled on May 4, 2002, with plastic ties and burned in a fire at their Lakeridge Drive home.

The jury of 10 men and two women reached a verdict on Victor Govin early last week, but

could not come to a unanimous decision on his brother. The jury foreperson said nine jurors voted to acquit and three voted to convict Peter Govin. Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Kathleen Kennedy-Powell declared a mistrial in that case.

Victor Govin showed no emotion and looked down as the verdict was read before a courtroom filled with friends and family of the victims and defendants.

Patel, 48, kept his eyes closed as the verdict was read and wiped away tears when the clerk finished reading.

"[Victor] was my neighbor, and we were really close," he later said. "I never thought he would have such a vicious mind to do such a thing."

In addition to murder, Victor Govin was convicted of burglary, arson and robbery. The jury also found that he committed multiple murders and that he killed for financial gain, both special allegations that make him eligible for a death sentence.

The same jury will begin deliberations Thursday on whether Victor Govin should be executed or spend the rest of his life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The judge instructed both the jurors and attorneys not to discuss the case.

The Govin brothers and Patel's family own neighboring motels in the 10700 block of Ventura Boulevard in Studio City. Both families wanted to reno-



**DEFENDANTS:** Victor Govin, left, faces the death penalty for the May 4, 2002, slayings in the Hollywood Hills. His brother, Peter Govin, is scheduled to return to court June 1 for a possible retrial.

vate and expand their businesses. Both also wanted to use the alley behind their motels for different purposes: The Govins, who own Studio Place Inn, wanted to build on the alley, and the Patels, who own Universal City Inn, wanted to use it as a driveway.

The trial began in late March and lasted nearly as long as the deliberations. The prosecution argued that the Govins killed Gita Kumar, a co-owner and manager of the hotel, because she was blocking the Govins' plans to use the alley.

The prosecution presented several witnesses who identified

Victor Govin and said he tried to hire them to intimidate a business rival. But Deputy Dist. Atty. Eleanor Hunter's case rested largely on a co-defendant and key witness, Carlos Amador, 27. Amador testified that he and the brothers robbed the home and that he saw the brothers torture the family.

Amador pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in a deal made with the district attorney's office. He is scheduled to be sentenced to four concurrent terms of 15 years to life in prison.

Amador's voice was shaking and cracking during his emotional testimony, and some

friends and family members sobbed as he described blindfolding and gagging the family with duct tape and watching Victor Govin strangle the victims. He said Peter Govin punched and kicked Gita Kumar.

The defense contended that Amador lied and may have masterminded the entire crime.

Victor Govin's attorney, Richard Steingard, maintained there was no business dispute.

Peter Govin's attorney, John E. Sweeney, said there was no evidence beyond Amador's testimony against his client. Sweeney called Amador "a disgusting, pathetic psychopath."

Attorney Anthony Salerno, who is not involved in the case, said the jury's doubt was not surprising.

"There is a jury instruction that says that you cannot convict someone on uncorroborated accomplice testimony," Salerno said, adding that co-defendants are "inherently unreliable because if they have a deal, they have a motive to lie."

Salerno said the jury apparently felt that evidence concerning Peter Govin outside of Amador's testimony — including surveillance that placed the brothers and Amador together after the crime — was not sufficient.

Patel said Tuesday he is still mourning his family.

"These guys, they have wiped out my whole family," Patel said. "I'm just by myself now."