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Mike Leffert

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Mysterious Murder Of Parliamentarians Has Salvadoran and Guatemalan Authorities Guessing

by Mike Leffert

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Three members of the Central American Parliament, Parlacen, and their driver were murdered the night of Feb. 19 in Guatemala. The deputies, Eduardo D'Aubuisson, Jose Ramon Gonzalez, and William Pichinte, were members of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) delegation from El Salvador. ARENA is the conservative ruling party. The driver was Jose Ramirez. These were highly unusual assassinations, even for Guatemala and El Salvador, countries known for their extraordinary levels of violence.

The bodies were found on a finca near kilometer 36 of the highway between Guatemala City and the border with El Salvador. Police were mystified as to the motives and circumstances of the killings, but Guatemalan Interior Minister Carlos Vielmann knew right off the bat that this was serious business. He told reporters that he would call in agents of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) because "the problem is too serious" to be investigated by the police of the two countries. He said there would be a "technical, professional, and scientific" investigation.

The bodies had been burned beyond easy recognition, but a forensic medical examination later determined that two of those killed, D'Aubuisson and Pichinte, had been shot in the back of the head. The other two had no bullets in them, according to the examiner, Mario Guerra Roldan. The legislators were identified by dental records brought from El Salvador. The presidents of both countries gave statements to the press.

El Salvador's President Antonio Saca said the act was "premeditated and cruel," and he did not venture an opinion as to why they were murdered. He gave his statement to the press soon after having attended a memorial mass for the father of one of the victims, the founder of ARENA Roberto D'Aubuisson. The elder D'Aubuisson died of cancer in February 1992. He is blamed for the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero and widely credited with running death squads during the civil war (1980-1992).

While neither president opined on motive, Panamanian Parlacen Deputy Arturo Vallarino was not at all reticent, if a bit vague. He said the reasons were political, that Parlacen was created "just to try to achieve peace in Central America. Perhaps this is a demonstration that peace has not been totally achieved." He said not much would be gained by moving Parlacen from Guatemala to a less chaotic Panama. The statement responded to the recommendation of his colleague Mayin Correa, who had advocated a move for the organization. "Parlacen should consider the possibility of changing the offices to any of the member countries, but I will propose that it be changed to Panama, because there is no security in Guatemala, El Salvador, or in Nicaragua because there is too much bad blood between political groups."

From the moment the victims were found burned inside a car, the media were in a frenzy and authorities under intense pressure to give insight or information they just did not have. Guatemala's chief of police Erwin Sperisen and his Salvadoran homologue Rodrigo Avila appeared before rabid reporters but were short on answers. Asked if the crime could be attributed to a specific group, Sperisen could only say, "This goes beyond any specific group." He testily told the media, "Hypotheses cannot be mentioned because the investigation is in its preliminary phase. Not even 24 hours have passed since it happened."

Avila said the dead deputies and driver left El Salvador for Guatemala City along with the other 20 Parlacen deputies in caravan, with their security details, and arrived in the afternoon, whereupon they told their security people they were not needed. Later, residents of the aldea El Jocotillo, a poor rural community near where the dead men were found, called the volunteer fire department to respond to a fire on the finca La Concha. A fire department spokesman later told EFE reporters, "After putting out the fire, we observed that inside the car were four people." Also found close by were six high-caliber shell casings.

Repercussions likely

As hazy as the circumstances remained, this case showed signs of having serious political repercussions. Saca, for instance, was careful not to make an outright accusation, but he did say the murders were "premeditated and planned by people who don't want freedom. We are not going to allow irresponsible people, communists, to achieve power." He told his coreligionists, "Since they kill with such cruelty, the message is to intimidate in their fight for your liberty, and that they will not get, because on the list of heroes of ARENA there are many, many, who gave their lives and blood to move this country away from communism." This whipping to high dudgeon took place during his speech commemorating the death of the elder D'Aubuisson.

Investigators are far from certain it was the communists. They seem fairly certain it was not common crime. The weapons seemed to have been assault rifles. It appeared that the burning, which was remarkably thorough, was done with white phosphorus. This evidence led Avila, a day after his joint conference with reporters, to conclude, "It is presumed that the assassination was executed in that place with the intention to not leave evidence," and that D'Aubuisson and Pichinte were the intended targets.

Investigators thought there were at least eight people involved in the deed. It turned out that the driver, Gonzalez, was also an agent of the Division de Proteccion a Personalidades Importantes of El Salvador's security forces. Prosecutors from the Ministerio Publico (MP) believe the assassins followed the victims from El Salvador with the intention of killing them in Guatemala where, annually, ARENA deputies gather at the Las Conchas finca to commemorate the death of Roberto D'Aubuisson. This was the same finca reportedly used by the right-wing death squads in the 1980s.

It was assumed that the victims were kidnapped in Guatemala City and brought there. For this reason, one line of investigation is the political motivation. Another theory the police were working on was that the victims had some kind of meeting planned with an unknown person about some kind of business deal. Residents said they saw two vehicles enter the finca, but only one left. After

that, they noticed the smell of burning. A third theory is that it was a vengeance killing having to do with the drug trade.

Parlacen deputies cross borders without search.

Other clues led them to determine that Gonzalez, the agent/driver, fired his weapon inside the car, and there were indications that cell-phone calls were made prior to the killings. Repercussions are feared on the Guatemalan side as well. Vice President Eduardo Stein was concerned the crimes would have a "negative impact on Guatemala." Carmen Rosa de Leon of the Consejo Asesor de Seguridad de Guatemala said that it adds fuel to the country's reputation as a place where this kind of thing can happen with impunity and that Guatemala's institutionality and its relationship with El Salvador would be harmed.

The country's major papers editorialized on this theme. The murders would, said Siglo Veintiuno, "dramatically raise the profile of violence that scourges Guatemalan society habitually related to common crime by introducing the possibility that this massacre could have a political motive." Prensa Libre was equally emphatic that "there is no doubt the prestige of Guatemala will be affected by acts like this as would occur in any country where parliamentarians of neighboring republics meet their death with the characteristics of savagery and violence of this assassination."

-- End --