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Guatemalan Government Says Murders Of Salvadoran Parliamentarians Solved

by Mike Leffert

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Guatemalan authorities announced a break in the investigation of the Feb. 19 murders of three Parlacen deputies from El Salvador. Investigations first led to the arrest of four Guatemalan policemen who were subsequently murdered in prison, leaving authorities clueless and bilateral diplomatic relations threatened. Now, Guatemala's Interior Minister Adela de Torrebiarte has announced new evidence implicating independent congressional Deputy Manuel Castillo in the murders.

The three deputies, Eduardo D'Aubuisson, William Pichinte, and Jose Ramon Gonzalez were found murdered with their driver Gerardo Ramirez (see NotiCen, 2007-03-29). After the jailhouse massacre of the four police suspects, relations between the two countries grew tense as El Salvador's President Antonio Saca repeatedly called for action and results from an embarrassed and helpless President Oscar Berger. The situation became worse for the Berger regime when US officials and FBI agents called in to assist in the investigation piled on, criticizing the conduct of the investigation by Guatemalan authorities, and accusing them of impeding the investigation and withholding information.

Untangling the web

Castillo was run to ground through an analysis of 307 phone calls the four policemen made just prior to their executions. The investigation showed calls between the accused cops and Castillo, and other calls between Castillo and five members of a drug gang from Jalpatagua, Jutiapa who had already been arrested for the murders. What was unknown until now was who ordered the hit on the Parlacen deputies. The government alleges the phone tree proves it was Castillo. According to the phone records, as reported by Prensa Libre, Castillo gave the final OK for the hit to a person identified only as Montana 3, just hours before the deputies were kidnapped in Guatemala City. Between Jan. 1 and March 31, there were 61 calls between Montana 3 and the congressman.

The government has also alleged that one of the gang members in custody, Mario Javier Lemus, was in command of the operation, and was the contact with the police officers who first arrived on the murder scene to find the bullet-riddled bodies, charred when the car in which they were riding was set afire to destroy evidence. Investigators have been able to determine that Montana 3, after getting the OK from Castillo, then called Lemus, and Lemus then called police officer Jeiner Barillas. Barillas then called officer Carlos Orellana Aroche, who, together with the other policemen, had already kidnapped the Parlacen victims. He also called Marvin Contreras Natareno, who then met with the killers from Jalapatagua, and who also got the gasoline to burn the victims and their car.

At the time of the killings, and during the aftermath when the policemen were massacred in prison, most observers in the press, in the two governments, and in the diplomatic corps expressed doubt

that this case would ever be solved, so the fingering of Castillo comes as a surprise. The timing is also something of a surprise. The story broke just two days before the Congreso Nacional was to vote on the creation of the Comision Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala. After the measure failed in committee (see NotiCen, 2007-07-19) many observers attribute its Aug. 1 passage on the floor at least in part to the breaking of this story by a government under intense international pressure to pass the law that creates a UN-backed institution that would deal with exactly the kind of organized conspiracy that has been so elegantly unraveled.

Solving this case, in the way that it has been solved, is absolutely unprecedented in Guatemala. Starting with the 307 original calls, a total of 3,450 connections were analyzed to put the whole story together. The FBI was brought in at the request of the Berger government shortly after the Feb 19 murders. According to Victor Rivera, investigation advisor to the Ministerio de Gobernacion, "The objective of the analysis that the task force of the ministry did is to provide evidence for trial, but it will also be turned over to the FBI's Central America chief."

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