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Red Lights Are On after Thieves Break into Costa Rica's Traffic Police Warehouse and Steal More Than 200 Glock Pistols

by George Rodriguez
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Shortly after midnight on Jan. 30, thieves broke into a Policía de Tránsito (PT) warehouse, stole 215 Glock 9 mm pistols, and slipped away. To do so, they overpowered two private security guards and opened the lock that was in their way at the installation, which has been undergoing reconstruction work since last year.

Local media have reported that late last year the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (MSP) presented the PT with a report warning against keeping firearms at the site, which was described as highly unsafe for that purpose. The warning came in September, when the MSP reported to the police force about flaws regarding the custody of weapons there, since the installation lacked security features. The report was delivered after the MSP’s weapons authority—Dirección General de Armamento—inspected the place.

The unheeded warning turned out to be correct, and months later the warehouse was easily broken into. But it was not the first time weapons belonging to the Costa Rican state were stolen. Among other cases, 100 firearms and several explosives were stolen from the national arsenal, a M-16 machine gun with a 25-bullet magazine was taken from a Fuerza Pública (FP) patrol car in the western port city of Puntarenas in March 2011, and two months later several M-16 pistols, more than 30 bullets, and several bulletproof vests were stolen from the Guácimo police station in the eastern province of Limón.

Break-in a wake-up call
But last month’s incident at PT headquarters turned on the red lights. The day after the theft, Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla told a press conference that stern measures would be applied to those responsible for what had happened some 30 hours before. "Drastic measures will be taken," Chinchilla told journalists at the Casa Presidencial—the government’s headquarters—adding that, "in the face of such a serious event…someone has to be responsible."

"That was, basically, the message the public works and transportation minister [Francisco Jiménez] received" from the very beginning, said the president, a former security minister, referring to the ministry responsible for the traffic police. "In general, when it comes to custody of firearms, there’s a chain, so to speak, of custody responsibility, which must now be observed."

"Measures have been taken, which reach the private [security] company and the people [the two guards] present at the installation at that moment," but such measures, "in my view, must go further," said Chinchilla, who stressed that the top priority, besides recovering the weapons, was "to clarify the events and to identify all responsible."
Opposition calls for action

Three days after the theft and two days after Chinchilla’s statements to reporters, opposition legislators told a press conference at congressional headquarters that not only had a police installation been easily broken into but high-precision weapons, preferred by organized crime—specifically hired killers—had been stolen.

Members of the five-party opposition bloc—since last year, in control of the 57-member unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL)—voiced concern at the incident. They called on Chinchilla to head the investigation rather than Jiménez, called on the minister and other high ministry and PT officials to resign, and described the incident as unacceptable.

Carmen Muñoz, a legislator for the center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) and vice president of the congressional Committee on Security and Drug Traffic, said, "It’s necessary for the president…to personally lead the investigation." Responsibilities in the case must also be established, added Muñoz, a member of Costa Rica’s leading opposition and second-largest political force.

José María Villalta, the only deputy from the leftist Frente Amplio (FA), said, "The Costa Rican state’s weapons can’t be in private hands."

In coinciding statements, Deputy Luis Fishman, who heads the bloc of the Partido Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC)—one of the country’s traditional parties, along with the ruling social democratic Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN)—underlined that "what worries me most of all is that an arsenal [of the state] could be entrusted to a private company."

"We’re talking about an arsenal, several hundred highly sophisticated weapons, such as Glocks, being guarded by a private company," added Fishman, a former security minister and former PUSC presidential candidate. "It seems to me almost Kafkaesque, unheard of, unacceptable, that weapons of our police forces be guarded by a private company. That must be reviewed….It’s utterly and totally unacceptable."

On another condemning note, Víctor Emilio Granados, leader of the Partido Accesibilidad Sin Exclusión (PASE)—a party upholding the rights of the disabled—stressed that "this is a weapon used by repressive police forces, not preventive ones such as the Policía de Tránsito. They even say that there’s no account of a traffic policeman having had to use a fire arm in any situation."

Costa Rica’s "traffic police officer is a preventive police officer, not a repressive police office," said Granados, who pointed out that "the worst thing is that the weapons that were bought and stolen are normally used by…élite police corps. It’s what experts say."

"And one wonders whether, in Costa Rica, there are élite police corps, least of all the Policía de Tránsito," Granados said, before stating the need "to establish responsibilities" in this case.

Along those lines, Claudio Monge, another PAC deputy, went further and warned that the Glock pistol "is a gun made of a material called polycarbonate, which is undetectable by metal detectors, and it’s the gun preferred by assassins the world over and by the mafia the world over. This must be pointed out, because Costa Rica is not exempt from this problem."
"[The Glock pistol] couples with a motorcycle called Vestrom, of which there are twelve units in Costa Rica. It’s the weapon the mafia uses along with that motorcycle," whose top speed is far higher than that of Costa Rican police vehicles, Monge said. He asked where would 215 such weapons go "if not to the mafia," pointing out that "they’re weapons fit to arm a brigade, an army—even to topple a government."

After the press conference, Monge told NotiCen, "There are political leaders, union leaders, who are watched by assassins, and that is most serious. There are politicians here who have received constant threats, there are colleagues who have been threatened….I’ve been threatened over the phone, they’ve sent me anonymous messages."

Monge also criticized entrusting a private security firm with guarding the PT weapons, saying that the company should be thoroughly investigated and adding that the magnitude of the PT incident is unprecedented in this Central American nation.

**Web site extols Glock’s capability**

Glock’s Web site description of its products says the top "among the small arms of the world is without doubt the GLOCK 'Safe Action' pistol."

"It employs innovative safety features which makes the pistol easy to operate. No other pistol offers a better price-performance ratio. Its minimum weight and legendary GLOCK reliability are unsurpassed," says the Web site. "It is exactly these characteristics that meet the requirements of police, special units, security services and the military. Extremely tough tests by public law enforcement agencies prove time and time again that GLOCK 'Safe Action' pistols function without compromise, even under the most extreme conditions."

The same day as the legislators’ press conference, Jiménez announced that high-ranking PT and Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Transportes (MOPT) officials had been separated from their posts, including PT director César Quirós and PT armory director Andrés Bermúdez. They were not dismissed, because due process must be followed, explained the minister.

The following day, as part of the ongoing investigation, Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ)—Costa Rica’s judicial police—agents found, during a house search on the outskirts of San José, the Costa Rican capital, 60 of the 215 stolen pistols, hidden inside a wall.

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