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Zedillo Renews Pledge To Solve Colosio Case; Many Questions Still Remain

by LADB Staff

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On March 23, President Ernesto Zedillo publicly renewed his pledge to solve the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio, promising that "no one who could provide useful information" to the case would be exempt from the investigation. Zedillo did not mention any names, but sources close to the investigation expect the list of those called to testify will include former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and key members of his administration. Colosio was gunned down while campaigning in a poor neighborhood in Tijuana less than four months after he had been designated to represent the governing Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the August 1994 presidential elections (see SourceMex, 03/30/94). Several people have been arrested in connection with the assassination, but the government has been unable to identify an intellectual author or authors.

The only formal charges thus far have been brought against factory worker Mario Aburto, who was arrested shortly after the assassination and charged with firing the two bullets that killed Colosio. Another suspect, Othon Cortes, was arrested in March of 1995 as a possible second gunman, but federal authorities have been unable to present positive proof of his involvement. Other suspected accomplices have also been released because investigators have been unable to prove their involvement in the case. They include former federal police officers Vicente Mayoral Valenzuela, Rodolfo Mayoral Esquer, Jose Rodolfo Rivapalacio, and Tranquilino Sanchez Venegas, who allegedly blocked Colosio's path while the gunman fired shots at the presidential candidate. According to a number of public opinion polls, the vast majority of Mexicans believe that Colosio's death was part of a broad conspiracy, probably planned by factions of the PRI or even members of the Salinas administration.

One private survey, taken by the daily newspaper Reforma among members of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, suggested that most federal legislators including a large majority of members of the governing PRI believe that Colosio's assassination was the result of a plot. Indeed, 95% of the respondents said the assassination may have been ordered by someone within the party or an outsider with close connections to the PRI. Only 5% of the respondents insisted on the theory first proposed by the government that Aburto acted alone in the assassination. "The results of the investigation thus far are not satisfactory," said PRI Senator Alvaro Vallarta Cecena, who issued a public statement on behalf of senators from all three parties represented in the Senate. "We still don't know the truth and this investigation has taken too long."

Meantime, in an interview with the Hermosillo (Sonora) daily newspaper El Imparcial, Colosio's father, Luis Colosio Fernandez, said he had received information from a confidential but reliable source implicating Salinas's chief aide Jose Cordoba Montoya in the assassination. "I think he [Cordoba] played a major role in this case, although I believe many others were also involved in the planning," Colosio Fernandez told the newspaper. The interview was conducted earlier

this year, but Colosio Fernandez asked that publication be withheld to coincide with the second anniversary of his son's death. For his part, columnist Froylan Lopez Narvaez of the weekly news magazine *Proceso*, in a column published on March 18, alluded to statements by Luis Donald Colosio's personal secretary, Alfonso Durazo, implicating Carlos Salinas. Durazo suggested that relations between the PRI candidate and Salinas deteriorated shortly after Colosio was designated to represent the governing party in the presidential elections. According to Durazo, Colosio angered Salinas when he initiated his presidential campaign in early January, against the wishes of the president.

Additionally, Durazo said Colosio openly favored enacting major reforms in the government and the PRI, which Salinas feared would severely curtail his political and financial interests in Mexico. A related theory, reported by the daily newspaper *El Financiero* in mid-March, was that Colosio had become dangerous to Salinas when he suggested links between the president's brother Raul and narcotraffickers, namely the so-called Gulf Cartel. According to the newspaper, Colosio had learned about Raul Salinas's involvement in drug trafficking and expressed strong concern about this fact to the president. Salinas's response to Colosio's concern was a straight denial that his brother was involved in any way with drug traffickers.

However, after the meeting with Colosio, Salinas was said to have immediately summoned his brother Raul, and several of his close advisers, including Cordoba, to discuss ways to deal with the situation. In fact, *El Financiero* said the PGR's current investigation is focusing on whether Raul Salinas was the one who ordered Colosio's assassination. The president's brother is already in custody on charges of masterminding the assassination of PRI official Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu in Mexico City in October 1994 (see *SourceMex*, 10/05/94).

Meantime, Carlos Salinas, whose whereabouts are unknown, has made it known through intermediaries that he would be willing to return to Mexico to testify regarding the Colosio and Ruiz Massieu cases. According to news reports, Salinas has told family members he is not a fugitive from justice and will report to a hearing once he receives a summons. Indeed, the PGR appears to be preparing to call Salinas to testify. According to the daily newspaper *La Jornada*, the PGR's special investigator, Pablo Chapa Bezanilla, said he will only issue a summons for Salinas once his office has compiled enough "solid" information to develop a questionnaire that could either give investigators "a new direction" in the case or sustain any evidence collected thus far.

Meantime, on March 26, key members of the PAN and the PRD and several non-governmental organizations made a formal request to Attorney General Antonio Lozano Gracia to investigate Luis Colosio Fernandez's allegations about Cordoba's role in planning the assassination. Federal Deputy Jesus Zambrano Grijalva, a member of the PRD, said Luis Colosio's statements were necessary to prompt the Zedillo administration to move forward with the investigation. However, Zambrano who is also a member of the special legislative commission investigating the Colosio assassination questioned whether Zedillo was involved in some sort of cover up, given his past ties to the Salinas administration. Indeed, Zedillo served in the Salinas cabinet as head of the now-defunct Budget and Planning Secretariat, and later as the Public Education Secretary. Zedillo was directing Colosio's campaign at the time of the assassination. He was later named to replace the slain president as the PRI's candidate in the 1994 elections.

Fueling the question of whether the Zedillo administration was committed to solve the Colosio assassination was the inconclusive report on the case released by the PGR on March 21. Attorney General Lozano, who is a member of the PAN, reiterated Zedillo's full support for the investigation and promised that the PGR will continue to place a high priority on the case. Lozano's report came under immediate attack from a broad range of politicians, including members of the PAN. Lozano, rather than Zedillo, served as the focal point for criticism from PRI president Santiago Onate, who called the PGR's report "useless" and "disappointing."

Meantime, new theories are emerging that Mario Aburto did not fire any shots at Colosio. In a press conference on March 23, Aburto's parents said they have carefully studied news footage of the assassination and have concluded that the person who actually fired the shot or shots at Colosio was not their son. They displayed photographs taken by a New York Times reporter, which showed that federal agents had already taken Aburto into custody immediately prior to the shooting, and that someone else actually fired the bullets at Colosio.

In an interview with the daily newspaper Excelsior, Aburto's lawyer Jorge Mancillas said his client may be willing to provide more information about the case if he is reassured that there will be no political or personal repercussions. "The only possibility for learning the truth is for the members of the special legislative committee for the Colosio case to change the procedures," said Mancillas. "The real hope in this case is that Mario Aburto has enough confidence [in the legislative committee] to tell them all he knows."

In a related development, a group of medical experts interviewed by El Financiero said their examination of the case suggests that the government coerced a confession from Aburto. The experts, members of Grupo Internacional de Peritos Profesionales, said Aburto was subjected to a series of psychological torture in the days before the assassination. The experts told El Financiero that the torture, termed "psychological treatments," were allegedly designed to convince Aburto to admit to the crime. According to some theories, the intellectual authors of the assassination "eliminated" the real gunman and replaced him with Aburto in the confusion that followed Colosio's assassination. (Sources: Proceso, 03/18/96; Inter Press Service, 03/21/96; El Financiero, 03/15/96, 03/21/96, 03/22/96, 03/26/96; Agence France-Presse, 03/05/96, 03/21/96, 03/25/96; Excelsior, 03/21/96, 03/22/96, 03/24/96, 03/25/96; El Imparcial, Novedades, 03/25/96; Reforma, La Jornada, 03/21/96, 03/22/96, 03/25/96, 03/26/96)

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