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Authorities Investigate Attack on Mexico's Chief Drug Enforcement Officer

by LADB Staff

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The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) is investigating an attack on Mexico's chief drug-enforcement officer, Mariano Herran Salvatti, as he sat in his vehicle on a busy Mexico City boulevard. Herran escaped injury in the attack, but one of his police escorts was injured in a gun battle with the four attackers, who were riding on two motorcycles. One assailant incurred serious injuries in the gun battle and was taken to the maximum-security Hospital Militar.

A message from drug dealers?

Some crime experts said the attack on Herran resembled recent incidents in Colombia, where paid assailants hired by drug traffickers hunt down their targets on motorcycles. But unlike the recent cases in Colombia, Herran's attackers failed to harm the drug-enforcement director even though 40 bullets were fired. "We don't know if this was an attempted killing or whether they just wanted to send a message," said Jorge Chabat, a specialist on military and drug-related matters at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE).

Jesus Blancornelas, who has conducted numerous investigations on the activities of drug traffickers in Baja California state through his weekly newspaper Zeta, said the incident did not fit the pattern of recent drug-related assassinations. Drug traffickers attempted to assassinate Blancornelas in December 1997, but the journalist survived the attack (see SourceMex, 1997-12-17). "This is a very strange case," said Blancornelas. "The leaders of organized crime are not going to send four people on two motorcycles to kill someone. They would more likely use a bazooka."

Investigators are treating the incident as a possible drug-related crime, although Attorney General Jorge Madrazo Cuellar has refused to rule out other motives, such as robbery. One theory is that the attackers were members of a motorcycle robbery gang. "We need to conclude the investigation, and once that's been done, we will make the results public," Madrazo told reporters.

Investigators for the Fiscalia Especializada para la Atencion a Delitos contra la Salud (FEADS), the agency headed by Herran, appear to have dismissed robbery as a motive for the attack. "We only have scattered clues at this time," FEADS sources told the daily newspaper El Universal. "But the sequence of events that preceded the attack seems to indicate that this was not a robbery."

FEADS replaced the Instituto Nacional para el Combate al las Drogas (INCD) in April 1997 as Mexico's top drug-enforcement agency. The INCD was dissolved shortly after its director, Gen. Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, was arrested for accepting bribes to protect leaders of the Juarez drug cartel (see SourceMex, 1997-02-26). In statements to the press, Herran left no doubt he believes drug traffickers were the perpetrators of the attack. "I think the authorities have the drug traffickers on the ropes and this is a response," said Herran. "This was a murder attempt."

Herran, who has been FEADS director since the office was created in April 1997, has received praise from US authorities for the role his office has played in fighting drug trafficking. "[This attack] shows that anti-drug efforts are becoming a nuisance [to drug dealers], and every day the actions by the Mexican government are having a greater impact," said Jeffrey Davidow, US ambassador to Mexico.

New US legislation complicates drug cooperation

Mexican authorities are expected to keep US President Bill Clinton's administration apprised of all developments in the investigation of the Herran case. While the two countries have opened several avenues of cooperation in the war on drugs, relations have remained tense because of reports linking top Mexican officials to drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 1999-04-14, 1999-06-09).

The Mexican government has also objected to the annual debate in the US Congress on whether Mexico should be certified as an ally in the war on drugs (see SourceMex, 1999-03-17, 1998-03-11). Recent drug-related legislation passed in the US Senate and under debate in the US House has again strained relations between the US and Mexico. The measure would give the US president the authority to expand economic sanctions against drug traffickers and businesses that cooperate with traffickers.

Under the sanctions, drug traffickers and their associates would be prohibited from conducting business in the US, their access to US banks would be cut off, and all their US assets would be frozen. The Mexican government expressed its opposition to the measure shortly after the Senate passed its version of the bill. "The Mexican government has repeatedly expressed profound concern about the negative consequences that may arise from the implementation of such a proposal," said Jesus Reyes Heróles, Mexico's ambassador in Washington, in a confidential letter to White House drug-policy director Gen. Barry McCaffrey.

Mexican legislators, academics, and business leaders criticized the bill at a forum in Mexico City in late August. They warned that any sanctions imposed through this legislation on Mexican businesses would violate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Deputy Sadot Sanchez Carreno, chair of the judicial committee (Comision de Justicia) in the Chamber of Deputies, said Mexico should request special panels through NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to review the measure, which he said is clearly an "unfair trade practice." (Sources: Notimex, 08/15/99; Reuters, 08/15/99, 08/16/99; San Antonio Express- News, 08/16/99; The Dallas Morning News, 08/15/99, 08/17/99; The News, Novedades, 08/16/99, 08/17/99; Spanish news service EFE, 08/15/99, 08/16/99, 08/18/99; Associated Press, 08/15/99, 08/18/99; La Jornada, 08/17/99, 08/18/99; CNN, 08/18/99; The New York Times, 08/24/99; Excelsior, 08/16/99, 08/23/99, 08/25/99; El Universal, 08/17/99, 08/18/99, 08/25/99)

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