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Government Detains Four Leaders of ERPI Guerrilla Group in Guerrero State

by LADB Staff

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In late October, the Mexican government announced the arrest of four leaders of the Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI), a guerrilla group that operated primarily out of the impoverished states of Guerrero and Oaxaca in southern Mexico. Guerrero state and federal law-enforcement authorities detained ERPI leaders Jacobo Silva Nogales, Gloria Arenas Ajis, Carlos Garcia Rosales, and Ofelia Flores Nava during a raid of a safe house in the Guerrero state capital of Chilpancingo.

Authorities said the arrest of Silva Nogales, also known as Comandante Antonio, was a significant step in the government's fight against the guerrilla insurrection in Guerrero and Oaxaca states. The ERPI is a splinter group of the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR), both organizations that Silva Nogales helped found.

Sources said Silva broke from the EPR in 1998 because of philosophical differences. The EPR became an armed group in 1995, following the massacre of 22 farm workers who supported opposition parties. The massacre is said to have been planned by then governor Ruben Figueroa, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

Documents obtained by the weekly news magazine Proceso said Silva Nogales disagreed with the EPR's commitment to a "prolonged popular war" against authorities. Silva instead was pushing for an armed insurrection in 2000. As a member of the EPR, Silva indirectly participated in the high-profile kidnappings of Mexican business leaders Alfredo Harp Helu, Angel Losada, and Jorge Sekiguchi. The EPR used the kidnappings to finance its operations. The EPR reportedly obtained US \$30 million in exchange for Harp Helu.

In announcing the arrests of the guerrilla leaders, authorities said they uncovered evidence that the ERPI was planning terrorist attacks in strategic locations to disrupt the presidential and congressional elections. Wilfrido Robledo, commissioner of the federal police (Policia Federal Preventiva, PFP), said the ERPI had targeted attacks in Mexico City, Morelos, Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon and Mexico, states during the elections scheduled for July 2, 2000. "Their intention was to infiltrate groups in several states and prepare them for the attacks," Robledo said. "However, the arrest of some of their leaders has foiled the attempt."

In an interview with the daily newspaper El Universal, security experts said the arrests show that the PFP and other law-enforcement agencies have developed more effective methods of gathering information about the movements of most guerrilla groups. Significance of arrests debated But other experts said the government was placing too much significance on the arrest of the ERPI leaders.

Maribel Gutierrez, author of a book examining the guerrilla movement in Guerrero state, said the ERPI, the EPR, and other groups will continue to operate even though key leaders are in custody. "One characteristic of the EPR and the ERPI is that neither depends on one individual leader," said Gutierrez, who covers Guerrero for the daily newspaper La Jornada.

Over the years, the federal government has arrested scores of EPR leaders. Each time, authorities said the arrest was a "victory" in the fight against the EPR. But Gutierrez said these movements will continue to thrive as long as the government fails to address questions of justice, including extreme poverty, repression, and impunity.

Gutierrez also disputed the government's attempt to portray the ERPI as an organization that does not support the electoral process. Speaking to The Dallas Morning News, she said the organization encouraged Guerrero citizens to vote in the gubernatorial election in February 1999 and in state legislative and mayoral races the following October.

Felix Salgado Macedonio, a candidate for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), received strong support in the gubernatorial election, which the PRI narrowly won (see SourceMex, 1999-02-10).

Gutierrez said the ERPI was unlikely to disrupt the 2000 presidential balloting unless there was massive evidence of fraud, similar to that alleged in the 1988 presidential election won by Carlos Salinas de Gortari. (Sources: Excelsior, La Jornada, Associated Press, 10/25/99; The News, 10/26/99, 10/27/99; The Dallas Morning News, 10/27/99; Novedades, Reforma, 10/25/99, 10/26/99, 10/28/99; El Universal, 10/29/99; El Financiero International, 11/01/99)

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