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British-Mexican Relations Tense Following Spying, Immigration Incidents

by LADB Staff
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Mexico's political relations with the United Kingdom have become strained because of what Mexicans perceive as British violations of the country's sovereignty. Tensions between the two countries first erupted in mid-February following revelations that British intelligence officers spied on the Mexican delegation at the UN in the days leading up to the UN vote on whether the international body would endorse a US resolution to invade Iraq.

The spying incident was followed in mid-March by allegations that a team of British cave explorers was conducting military exercises and other unauthorized activities on Mexican territory. Mexico angered about spying reports The spying reports first appeared in the London-based daily newspaper The Observer, which said British intelligence agencies acted on a US request to assist in eavesdropping on UN delegates' home and office telephones before the Iraq war. Mexico was important because of its position as a temporary member of the UN Security Council. Like many members of the Security Council, Mexico ended up voting against the US- and British-led resolution (see SourceMex, 2003-03-26).

The US request was contained in a National Security Agency (NSA) memo leaked to the newspaper last year. A former translator at Britain's communications headquarters, Katharine Gun, acknowledged leaking the NSA memo to The Observer. She was accused of breaking Britain's state secrecy laws, but charges were later dropped. Mexico's former UN ambassador, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, said he was aware that the US and Britain may have been spying on Mexico and other countries.

The issue came up in a conversation with Chile's UN Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdes, who passed on his suspicions to Aguilar Zinser. "I always acted with the understanding that we were the subject of espionage, that our communications were being intercepted," said Aguilar Zinser, who lost his job shortly after accusing the US of treating Mexico as its backyard (see SourceMex, 2003-11-19). The spying reports created outrage in the Mexican Congress, which urged President Vicente Fox to lodge a vigorous protest with the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "It is not right that Britain, which plays a fundamental role in the UN Security Council...dedicate itself to bug telephones and engage in acts of espionage against other nations," said Sen. German Sierra Sanchez, a member of former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The Fox government did follow the Senate requests and lodge protests with London and Washington, but later let the matter drop. Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez said the decision to shelve the issue was the result of Britain's move to drop charges against Katherine Gun. "If there is no trial [against Gun], we won't be able to verify whether there was espionage," said Derbez. Some senators took issue with Derbez's decision not to pursue the charges. "Rather
than present an energetic protest, the Mexican government offered a lukewarm response," said Sen. Jesus Ortega of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

**Mexico deports British explorers on visa violations**

The Mexican anger regarding the spying allegations had not yet subsided when a new incident further strained relations between the two countries. In March, Mexican authorities expelled a team of British scientists and military officers on charges of violating the terms of their visas. The 13-member team was detained at the Cuevas de Cuetzalan in the central state of Puebla after flood waters trapped six members of the expedition in one of the caves. The Britons raised suspicions because they initially refused assistance from Mexican rescue teams and because they carried sophisticated telecommunications equipment and gas detectors, prompting speculation that they were hunting for radon and accompanying deposits of uranium.

The secretiveness and the presence of military officers on the British team prompted wide speculation in the Mexican media about the team's intentions, including a possible search for materials for nuclear weapons. Mexican weapons specialist Jose Luis Gonzalez, who had taken part in the UN nuclear-weapons inspection teams in Iraq, fueled speculation further by saying that the Cuetzalan caves were "a feasible site to find uranium and other radioactive materials."

British government spokespersons immediately rejected these allegations as "pure fantasy" and said the explorers were simply conducting a surveying exercise. The mission, they said, was sponsored by the Combined Services Caving Association and the Royal Geographical Society. "Any suggestions they were mining or exploring for uranium is incorrect," a spokesperson for the British Ministry of Defense said in London. The incident provided political fodder for the Fox government and the major political parties. "We are asking the British government to tell us whether these people are military personnel, and, if they are, what they are doing there," President Fox told reporters in Honduras, where he was on an official visit in mid-March.

Similar statements came from Derbez. "We are not going to tolerate a situation where no one [from the British government] offers an explanation of exactly what their citizens were doing here," he said. The Mexican Congress joined the chorus of criticisms against Britain. "We are not opposed to allowing foreign researchers to conduct their activities in our country, as long as they follow institutional mechanisms and established international protocols," said Sen. Erika Larregui Nagel of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM). "But the clandestine manner with which this group of scientists and military personnel conducted its activities raises concerns about their motives."

The British team eventually accepted assistance from Mexican authorities, and members were taken into custody by immigration officials. British team only guilty of immigration violations The Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) launched an extensive investigation into whether the British explorers had engaged in any criminal activities, but later determined that no major laws had been violated. Armando Salinas, deputy interior secretary for migration, population, and religious affairs, said investigations by the PGR and the Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM) determined that the activities of the British explorers did not in the end represent a "national security" danger to Mexico.
But the Britons, who were interrogated for three days, were charged with technical violations of Mexico's immigration law because they conducted scientific research, which was not allowed under the terms of the tourist visas they were issued.

The INM deported the British team, barring them from returning to Mexico for two years. In London, the Blair administration called the expulsion "unjust," and said the British government would file an appeal. "Due to the potential effect on caving in general and cavers wishing to visit Mexico, we intend to contest this finding in an appeal over the next couple of weeks," expedition leader Maj. Stephen Whitlock told reporters upon the team's arrival in London. Whitlock denied that the team was conducting any activities other than exploring caves. "The only thing that we were doing in Mexico was actually enjoying the sport of caving, finding new caves where nobody has ever been before," said Whitlock.

Some Mexican tourism officials, who promoted the Cuevas de Cuetzalan among international spelunkers, were caught by surprise by the furor created by the incident. "We're astonished because we don't know why so much was made over this [incident]," said Lilia Rueda, who directs the office of alternative tourism at the Secretaria de Turismo (SECTUR). The London-based newspaper The Guardian said British spelunkers have been exploring the vast network of caves in Cuetzalan since the 1970s without arousing any suspicions. This included an expedition in 2000, when a British military team surveyed much of the system of caves.

Mexican spelunkers also came to the defense of their British counterparts. "The [government] humiliated the visitors," said Humberto Tachiquin, a member of the Sociedad Mexicana de Exploraciones Subterráneas. The Fox government, however, defended its actions. "We want Mexico to continue to be a country that is open to the world," said Interior Secretary Santiago Creel. "But any foreigners who come to our land have to comply strictly with our laws."

Still, some experts saw the government's response as an overreaction because of pressure from opposition political parties and because of still-simmering anger about the spying allegations in February. "I wouldn't discount the possibility that the reaction of Mexican authorities to some extent is related [to the spying allegations]," said Andres Rozental, head of the think tank Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales. (Sources: El Financiero, 02/12/04, 03/25/04; The Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, 03/26/04; The Independent-London, 03/28/04; Associated Press, 02/12/04, 03/25/04, 03/26/04, 03/29/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 02/16/04, 02/27/04, 03/24/04, 03/29/04; Reuters, 03/23/04, 03/24/04, 03/26/04, 03/28/04, 03/29/04; The Guardian-London, 03/24/04, 03/27/04, 03/29/04; Notimex, 03/24/04, 03/25/04, 03/27/04, 03/29/04; Spanish news service EFE, 02/11/04, 02/12/04, 03/25/04, 03/28/04, 03/30/04; Unomasuno, 02/12/04, 02/13/04, 02/16/04, 03/25/04, 03/26/04, 03/30/04; El Universal, 02/13/04, 03/25-30/04; Agence France-Presse, 03/24/04, 03/25/04, 03/27/04, 03/30/04; El Independiente, La Cronica de Hoy, 03/25/04, 03/26/04, 03/28-30/04; La Jornada, 02/12/04, 02/13/04, 02/18/04, 02/19/04, 03/25-28/04, 03/30/04, 03/31/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 03/24-26/04, 03/28/04, 03/29/04, 03/31/04; El Sol de Mexico, 03/25/04, 03/26/04, 03/28-31/04; Milenio Diario, 03/25/04, 03/26/04, 03/28/04, 03/31/04)