

7-25-2007

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Guerrilla Group Claims Responsibility for Pipeline Attacks in Central Mexico." (2007).
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Guerrilla Group Claims Responsibility for Pipeline Attacks in Central Mexico

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2007-07-25

In early July, the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) launched a series of attacks on oil and gas pipelines operated by the state-run oil company PEMEX in central Mexico, paralyzing business operations in some communities in the heavily industrialized states of Queretaro, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, and Jalisco. The EPR said it placed eight bombs along pipelines, with one causing a major explosion near the community of Corregidora in Queretaro.

The EPR emerged during the 1990s in the impoverished state of Guerrero, pledging to punish wealthy elites and government officials for keeping the country in poverty (see SourceMex, 1996-09-18). After the recent explosions, the EPR issued a statement saying its actions were part of a "national campaign of harassment against the interests of the oligarchy and of this illegitimate government that has been put in motion."

In a second communique in mid-July, the group added a demand: the release of two of its members, Edmundo Reyes Amaya and Raymundo Rivera Bravo, who were allegedly being detained in Oaxaca state. The Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) said, however, that neither individual was in federal custody and that there was no evidence that state authorities in Oaxaca were holding them.

Attacks target industrial states

The first set of explosions, which occurred on July 5, damaged valves in three PEMEX pipelines: one connecting Guanajuato and Guadalajara, and two others in the cities of Salamanca and Celaya in Guanajuato state. The fourth incident occurred at the PEMEX facility outside Corregidora, where a huge explosion severed several pipelines, including one used to transport natural gas to local distributors and another that supplied a local refinery with crude oil.

The attacks created a natural-gas shortage in parts of the four-state area and forced hundreds of companies to curtail or suspend operations, including Nissan de Mexico, Honda Motor Co., Grupo Modelo, Grupo Vitro, and Hershey de Mexico. "There are more than a thousand, nearly 1,200, companies that have been greatly hurt because of the lack of [gas] supply," Victor Manuel Lopez Bolanos, secretary of the Camara Nacional de la Industria de Transformacion (CANACINTRA), told Reuters.

By some estimates, total losses surpassed US\$6.4 million a day for medium and large companies. Vitro said its losses amounted to US\$800,000 daily. While the incidents created some production delays and stoppages, Mexican officials predicted very little long-term damage to the economy or to the affected companies. "These companies already have plans in place to compensate for lost production," said Economy Secretary Eduardo Sojo.

Diego Arasola, director of corporate communications at Nissan de Mexico, said the company is holding to its projections to assemble 500,000 units this year even though production at the company's plant in Aguascalientes was halted for five days. He said the plant as well as all its providers had enough auto parts stored to resume production immediately. Additionally, Nissan's facility was able to resume some production after technicians configured the plant to run temporarily on propane, a spokesman told The Wall Street Journal.

Other security experts downplayed the significance of the attacks as isolated, relatively small, and symbolic. "You have to view these acts as sporadic," said Alejandro Gertz Manero, who served as public security secretary under ex-President Vicente Fox and police chief under former Mexico City Mayor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. "There is no danger to the stability of the country or its institutions."

George Baker, a Houston-based energy analyst who follows the Mexican energy industry closely, agreed that the attacks were only a minor setback for PEMEX because the company can fix the damage to the pipelines fairly quickly. If the attacks had caused serious damage to a refinery or international pipelines, then the repercussions would have been greater. "As long as we're talking about just some pipelines in the desert someplace, we don't have to worry about it too much," Baker told The Houston Chronicle.

Business community expresses some concern

Still, the attacks created some concerns among the business community. "We have to determine whether we are entering a new phase of terrorism or sabotage on the part of one particular group," said Abel Garcia Ocampo, an official at General Motors de Mexico. Some of the concern is justified, with some business leaders still aware of the economic downturn that followed the uprising of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1994 (see SourceMex, 1994-01-12).

The EPR appeared on the scene in the impoverished southern state of Guerrero in 1996, two years after the Zapatista uprising. The EPR adopted more violent methods than the EZLN in making its points. While the EZLN assumed control of four communities by generally peaceful means in 1994, the EPR used semi-automatic weapons to attack the community of Aguas Blancas in Guerrero in 1996. The group then launched several unsuccessful attacks on several police stations and army barracks that year before splitting into about 10 factions.

The EPR has remained mostly quiet since the 1996 attacks, although some factions of the organization claim to have carried out a series of explosions outside banks, government institutions, and the headquarters of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Mexico City in November 2006. The EPR has been unable to garner much sympathy among the Mexican population, partly because the organization is viewed as extreme.

Regardless of the EPR's inability to win over the public to its cause, analysts say the prevalence of poverty in Mexico remains a factor that could foster instability. "Mexico has been slipping toward some sort of Colombia situation where you have narcos and guerrillas around because you have a government that isn't fighting poverty," Mexico City-based energy analyst David Shields told the Los Angeles Times. "So I would not be sure that this is the end of it."

Some analysts noted that gap between the rich and the poor is narrowing way too slowly, as evidenced by the 2006 survey of income and expenditures Encuesta Nacional de Ingreso y Gasto de los Hogares (ENIGH). "The reduction in inequality is proceeding at a much slower pace than the country's economic development," said Saul Arellano, an analyst at the Centro de Estudios e Investigacion en Desarrollo y Asistencia Social (CEIDAS). "It could take as long as 50 years to end extreme poverty the type of poverty that is measured by a lack of sufficient food."

EPR demands release of two jailed comrades

The EPR vowed to continue its attacks until the government released Reyes Amaya and Rivera Bravo, also known as Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez, who disappeared in late May. The EPR claims the two men were detained on the orders of Gen. Juan Alfredo Oropeza Garnica, an expert in counterinsurgency and a graduate of the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. "We are well aware that our companions have been subject to torture at the hands of Gen. Oropeza Garnica," the EPR said in a statement.

The group said it would continue attacks on government installations as a justified self-defense response to what it called government harassment. "We are not criminals, and much less terrorists," the EPR said in its second communique. "But up against the latent death threats against our members and the government's fascist offensive against the entire popular movement, we are obliged to exercise the legitimate right of self defense."

SEGOB officials insisted that neither the Mexican Army, nor the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), nor the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica was holding the two individuals in question. "We can say with absolute certainty that the federal government is not holding those members of the EPR," Interior Secretary Francisco Ramirez Acuna told reporters.

The administration's statements were not enough to convince the EPR. "We continue to demand that the government reveal the whereabouts of our comrades," the guerrilla group said in a statement. "You can deny it over and over again, but we are aware that they are being held in violation of their constitutional rights."

President Felipe Calderon's administration has been under some criticism for failing to gather the necessary intelligence to prevent the attacks. Ramirez acknowledged that the agency to conduct such a task, the Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), is understaffed and underfunded. PRI Sen. Francisco Labastida said the blame should go to ex-President Vicente Fox, who basically gutted CISEN. "We are now seeing the consequences," said Labastida.

Analysts urge government to take attacks seriously

Analysts agreed that the Calderon administration has to stay on top of the situation. "The worst thing it could do is ignore it. But that doesn't mean the EPR represents a big threat to national security," political analyst Pedro Gonzalez told Reuters. "I don't think [the EPR] has the capacity to send out contingents to blow up oil platforms or export pipelines. Those things are well guarded. But there could be more acts of sabotage."

PEMEX officials acknowledged that they lack the resources to monitor the entire network of pipelines. The company currently uses the Sistema de Control de Ductos (SCADA), which only detects changes in pressure in the pipelines. After the attacks, Calderon moved quickly to protect Mexico's pipelines by sending troops to strategic locations. But analysts said the network, which spans 65,000 km, remains vulnerable even with the increased security. "Pipelines go out into the middle of desert. They cross the whole country. They are inherently vulnerable," said analyst Baker. "It's physically impossible to guard every section of pipeline."

Some members of the opposition Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) questioned whether the EPR had actually conducted the attacks on the pipeline. "It's been a long time since the group has committed any act of sabotage, and there seems no reason for them to attack PEMEX [at this point]," the center-left party said in a statement.

Former PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador suggested that the Calderon administration fabricated the attacks to divert attention from Mexico's "serious economic problems" and from the scandal involving Zhenli Ye Gon, a Chinese immigrant who has alleged that the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) forced him to stash millions of dollars in a special fund for Calderon's 2006 presidential campaign (see other article in this issue of SourceMex).

The EPR's Guanajuato state committee, which is said to have carried out the attacks, criticized the comments from the PRD and Lopez Obrador. Without mentioning any names or parties, they questioned "those who doubted their existence and participation in the destruction of the pipelines." Still, some observers agree that there is room for doubt, given the sophisticated nature of the recent attacks on the pipelines and their location. "The attacks in the center of the country were outside the group's territory in the south," said The Wall Street Journal. "

An attack on natural resources is also a major departure." Mexican security officials point out that the bombs used to sabotage the pipelines were far more sophisticated and powerful than the devices linked to leftist groups in the past decade. "The differences are so apparent that some government officials are privately wondering whether the EPR is indeed behind the attacks," said The Wall Street Journal. "Speculation about who else might have benefited from the move has run the gamut from drug gangs seeking to divert the Mexican army's antinarcotics push, to oil-worker union bosses seeking leverage in salary negotiations."

Other analysts noted that the attacks on the pipelines could represent a shift in the EPR's mostly propagandistic tactics and in its ability to penetrate government security. "This could mean that they [the guerillas] have passed from the phase of making statements to direct sabotage," Javier Ibarrola, a commentator on military affairs, told The Dallas Morning News.

The change may have occurred shortly after the disputed 2006 presidential election, which Calderon won by an extremely narrow margin (see SourceMex, 2006-07-12, 2006-08-09 and 2006-08-30). Analysts said many leftist groups felt let down by institutions after that election. "It's impossible not to think that armed groups would readjust their tactics," said Jesus Zamora Garcia, a historian at the Universidad de Guadalajara.

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