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Ejercito Popular Revolucionario Damages PEMEx Pipelines Again

by LADB Staff

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For the second time in two months, the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) conducted acts of sabotage that caused major disruptions to various sectors of the Mexican economy. In its latest action on Sept. 9, the EPR detonated explosions at six locations in Veracruz and Tlaxcala states, causing significant damage to natural-gas pipelines that serve consumers in major cities in southcentral Mexico.

The EPR's motive for the attacks was similar to its motive for the sabotage in Guanajuato and Queretaro states in July: to force the release of two comrades it claims are being held by the government and to challenge the legitimacy of President Felipe Calderon's government.

As with the earlier incident, several major industrial companies were forced to suspend operations because of a lack of fuel, causing major economic losses. In a communique, the EPR acknowledged causing the pipeline explosions in the municipalities of La Antigua, Ursulo Galvan, Olmeaca, Mendoza, and Cumbres de Maltrata in Veracruz, and Cuiapixtla in Tlaxcala. Authorities were forced to evacuate several communities and close two major highways because of fires and leaking gas at some of the sites.

The group left explosives near Nuevo Tapa-Cadereyta in Veracruz state, but purposely did not detonate them. Instead, the EPR left a note demanding the release of its two comrades. "They were taken alive, and we want them back alive," the note said. The government has denied that the two men are in custody either in federal prison or in Oaxaca (see SourceMex, 2007-07-25).

Although the release of its two comrades was its principal motive, the EPR said it wanted to send a message to President Calderon, whom it called a "fascist" and "illegitimate," in reference to allegations that the governing party committed fraud to ensure victory in the 2006 presidential elections. The group also said it intended to continue the acts of sabotage to bring attention to the economic inequalities in Mexico.

PEMEX officials acknowledge "serious" damage to network

Officials of the state-run oil company PEMEX acknowledged that the sabotage caused serious damage to the company's network of pipelines, particularly in Veracruz. "This was an attack against a central portion of our system of pipelines," said PEMEX director Jesus Reyes Heróles, who estimated that damage would mount to about US\$3 million.

Reyes Heróles said repairs on the damaged sections of the pipelines could take as long as a week, with full distribution expected to resume on Sept. 18. Pemex Gas y Petroquímica (PGPB), the refining and distribution subsidiary of the company, said the disruptions meant that users would

not receive between 1.2 billion and 1.4 billion cubic feet of gas daily for the seven-day period. This is equivalent to one-fourth of national production, said the PGPB. The sabotage affected 2,800 companies in eleven states, most of which were forced to suspend operations because of the lack of fuel.

Losses to industry expect to total US\$800 million

The Camara Nacional de la Industria de Transformacion (CANACINTRA) estimated losses to Mexican industry at about US\$100 million per day, or about US\$800 million for a week. These losses would greatly surpass those from the July acts of sabotage, estimated initially at US\$6.4 million per day. The list of companies affected by the latest disruption included Volkswagen de Mexico, which employs about 7,700 workers at its plant in Puebla. Volkswagen expects to resume operations on Sept. 17.

Also affected was Grupo Mabesa, Puebla's second-most-important exporter. The company produces disposable diapers. A third major plant in Puebla affected by the disruptions was Grupo Hylsa. The Camara Nacional de la Industria del Hierro y Acero (CANACERO) said Hylsa's facility in Puebla was one of 29 plants in the area that had to suspend operations because of a lack of natural gas. The 29 plants, operated by 12 companies, represent about 60% of Mexico's steel production. The metals industry also suffered significant losses from the July sabotage, said CANACERO.

The sabotage led the federal government to dispatch army units and other law-enforcement personnel to safeguard PEMEX installations around the country. Authorities said they had launched an investigation to determine whether the EPR received assistance from any PEMEX employees. The increased vigilance was expected to be only a small deterrent. Some observers noted that the government boosted security after the first EPR attacks and was still unable to prevent the latest sabotage.

Some critics also pointed to the poor intelligence-gathering capabilities of Mexico's law-enforcement agencies, which allowed the EPR to carry out the latest attacks with such ease. "To try and guard this extensive and complicated network of pipelines with police or soldiers is simply impossible," said syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento. "Members of these terrorist organizations know that. They have found the Achilles' heel of the Mexican economy. And they are attacking it at will."

Reyes Heroles acknowledged that securing all installations completely was an impossible task. "We operate more than 19,000 installations around the country and more than 50,000 km of pipeline," he said. Several key PEMEX installations remained unprotected in the aftermath of the attack, including the fuel-storage site near Santa Maria El Tule in Oaxaca state. "Scarcely 72 hours have transpired since the six acts of sabotage on PEMEX pipelines, and the storage facility in Oaxaca still lacks the minimum level of security," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.

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