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Authorities Reopen Investigation of Human Rights Lawyer's Death

by LADB Staff
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Authorities in Mexico City have discarded the long-held premise that the death of human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa y Placido was a suicide and have reopened the case. Ochoa, who worked with the Jesuit-run Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustin Pro Derechos Humanos (PRODH), was found dead from a gunshot wound in her apartment in Mexico City in October 2001.

Investigators for the Procuraduria General de Justicia del Distrito Federal (PGJDF) found a threatening note near the body but classified the death as a suicide after subsequent investigations. This conclusion drew strong protests from human rights advocates, who insisted that she had been murdered. The continued pressure kept attention on the case, and, in May 2008, the PGJDF and prosecutors in Guerrero state announced they have a suspect Rogaciano Alva Alvarez, the former mayor of the coastal community of Petatlan.

The Procuraduria de Justicia en Guerrero (PJG) made the initial announcement that Alva Alvarez is under investigation as the intellectual author of Ochoa's murder. The PGJDF decision to join the investigation in effect overrides its conclusion that Ochoa committed suicide (see SourceMex, 2002-03-20). Even though the case was initially within the jurisdiction of the Mexico City government, federal authorities also came under strong criticism for their inaction in launching an investigation (see SourceMex, 2005-02-09).

Human rights advocates in Mexico City were pleased with the decision to reopen the case but said they would reserve judgment until they could see some results. Attorney Pilar Noriega urged the PGJDF to re-examine some of the evidence obtained at the scene of Ochoa's death. "We want an in-depth investigation," Noriega told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. A similar call came from Emilio Alvarez Icaza, president of the Comision de Derechos Humanos del Distrito Federal (CDHDF), who called the suicide theory extremely weak. "Now Mexico City authorities must conduct an exhaustive investigation," he said.

Former Guerrero mayor might be intellectual author

The link to Alva Alvarez is very relevant, since Ochoa had worked on the legal defense of environmental activists Rodolfo Montiel and Teodoro Cabrera. The two men had led a campaign to stop multinational corporations from conducting logging activities in Guerrero state forests (see SourceMex, 2000-04-03 and 2001-10-31). Alva Alvarez is said to have greased the wheels for the logging companies. Montiel and Cabrera, who had been held in prison on bogus drug-trafficking and weapons charges, were released from prison in 2001, thanks in part to Ochoa's efforts. (see SourceMex, 2001-11-14).

In addition to defending Montiel and Cabrera, Ochoa had taken other high-profile human rights cases, including those involving sympathizers of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional
(EZLN) in Chiapas state and the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) in Guerrero state. She received the Enduring Spirit Award for her efforts. The Mexico City government's decision to reopen the case was based on statements from Guerrero residents Javier Torres and his uncle Isaias Torres, who testified that they knew that Alva had ordered three of his bodyguards to murder Ochoa. Javier and Isaias Torres said they feared for their lives because Alva had already tortured and killed three other Guerrero residents Romulo Sanchez Coria, Anselmo Torres Rosas, and Jesus Rosas Galan who knew of the plot. Sanchez was murdered in 2005, Torres in 2006, and Rosas in 2007.

In an interview with La Jornada de Guerrero newspaper in 2007, Javier Torres said one of Alva's bodyguards, Javier Valle Villa, confirmed in a conversation that he had actually carried out the orders to murder Digna Ochoa. Ex-mayor also said to be involved in drug trade Alva Alvarez, who served as mayor of Petatlan from 1993 to 1996, is also under investigation for other activities related to organized crime. His involvement in the drug trade was widely reported by local media and was even documented in a piece that Ochoa co-authored that was published by Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

Authorities said a recent incident further confirmed Alva's involvement in the drug trade. In what a former Guerrero official described as a feud between drug traffickers, unknown assailants conducted attacks on two properties owned by Alva in Petatlan and in Iguala in early May, resulting in 17 deaths. Alva was not at either facility during the attacks, but the perpetrators killed his sons Alejandro and Rusbel and kidnapped his daughter Ana Karen. Relatives said he has since gone into hiding.

Guerrero authorities said they are cooperating with police forces in the neighboring states of Michoacan, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Morelos to find those responsible for the attacks and to rescue Alva's daughter. The investigation of Alva's involvement in the drug trade is separate from the Digna Ochoa case. But the two cases illustrate the influence that Alva had attained as a local cacique, or rural boss, in a section of Guerrero state known as Costa Grande.

The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal reported that Alva was close to former Guerrero governor Ruben Figueroa Alcocer, a corrupt politician who was forced to resign because of his role in covering up the infamous Aguas Blancas massacre (see SourceMex, 1999-02-10). Alva, a member of the long-governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), had tight control of many local industries, including legal activities like ranching and logging and illegal activities such as drug trafficking. For many years he served as local leader for the Union Regional Ganadera del Estado de Guerrero.

Observers say Alva's involvement in the drug trade is not surprising, since Costa Grande is a strategic location for cocaine shipments from Colombia to enter Mexico. The coastal mountains of Guerrero are also ideal for cultivating opium poppies and marijuana. "Many farmers in the region are forced to plant, guard, or transport drugs for the cartels, and it is hard to conceive that someone of Alba's stature wasn't at least approached by the cartels for help," said the Associated Press.

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