 Attacks Disrupt Independence Day Celebration in Calderon's Home State

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Attacks Disrupt Independence Day Celebration in Calderon's Home State

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-09-24

In the west-central city of Morelia, Michoacan state, the traditional Mexican Independence Day celebration was interrupted by a violent grenade attack on participants who had gathered on the evening of Sept. 15. The attack occurred as communities across Mexico were preparing to celebrate the traditional "Grito de Independencia," which commemorates the start of Mexico's struggle for independence from Spain.

The biggest of those celebrations is led by the president in Mexico City, with smaller events around the country presided over by mayors and governors. Because the attack occurred in President Felipe Calderon's hometown of Morelia, authorities speculated that the incident was a response to the president's efforts to crack down on drug traffickers and organized crime (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2008-09-03).

The attack killed eight people and injured more than 100 others. The attackers tossed three fragmentation grenades into a crowd that had gathered for the Independence Day ceremony at Plaza Melchor Ocampo in Morelia, which was led by Michoacan Gov. Leonel Godoy.

One grenade landed less then 200 meters from the podium, where Godoy and other officials were standing. The attack prompted a harsh statement from President Felipe Calderon. "These deplorable acts...were committed by traitors who have no respect for their fellow citizens and for their country," said the president.

Calderon called on citizens to unite in the fight against drug traffickers, who are thought to have carried out the attack. "All Mexicans, no matter what our beliefs or positions, should join in completely repudiating these cowards," said the president. "We must condemn these types of attacks."

Godoy described the attack as the "work of terrorists" and vowed to work hard to find the perpetrators. "Everyone is working to find and punish those responsible for this attack," the governor told reporters. "A challenge to the president" Jose Luis Soberanes, president of the semi-independent human rights commission (Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH), said the attack was a clear message to Calderon from organized crime. "[Morelia] is the president's hometown, and the attack occurred on one of Mexico's most revered holidays," said Soberanes. "This is a clear challenge to the president."

Other political observers agreed with the assessment. "The state and society are facing a group of organizations that use methods employed by guerrillas, but they do not have an ideological objective nor do they have a clear goal other than cause instability," wrote columnist Jorge...
Fernandez Menendez in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "These are organizations that do not need a large number of people [to carry out the attacks]. All they need is a small group of people without scruples but with a lot of resources and weapons."

Alfredo Sanchez Rebolledo, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada, said civil society has been caught in the middle of two different wars: one among the cartels themselves, and another between the government and the drug traffickers. "Extreme violence is not only becoming the method to send a message but also the modus operandi employed in these confrontations," said Sanchez Rebolledo. "Thus, they are eliminating any consideration based on respect for human life."

**Drug cartels under investigation**

The attack was initially attributed to a local syndicate known as La Familia, which had participated in local drug-trafficking activities. But doubts began to arise on whether the organization had carried out the attack. Several members of the media and residents of Morelia received text messages on their cell phones in which members of La Familia denied having participated in the attacks.

Those same messages blamed the incident on the Zetas, an elite group of army deserters, which had acted as enforcers for the Gulf cartel. The Gulf cartel has recently been active in major drug-trafficking operations in Michoacan state (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26).

La Familia and the Gulf cartel are fighting for control of some of the same areas in Michoacan. In addition to the text messages, several banners were hung over pedestrian bridges proclaiming the innocence of La Familia. Authorities were investigating whether the messages and the banners were authentic.

The rival Sinaloa cartel also weighed in on the situation, criticizing the Gulf cartel, members of La Familia, and the Zetas in a statement sent to several daily newspapers in Mexico. "We have never targeted innocent people, and much less in public events," said the statement. "We feel for those who are sorry for having carried out this attack, but it's too late now, and you will have to pay the consequences," added the statement attributed to associates of Sinaloa cartel leaders Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman and Ismael "Mayo" Zambada.

The Procuraduria de Justicia del Estado de Michoacan (PJEM) and several federal agencies including the Subprocuraduría de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO), the Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN), and the Policia Federal Preventiva (PFP) continued to investigate the case but had not made any high-profile arrests more than a week after the incident.

Federal authorities briefly detained three suspects as they traveled through Zacatecas state. The three men were stopped because they had wounds resembling shrapnel injuries consistent with those suffered by the victims in Morelia. The injuries turned out to be unrelated to the Morelia attack, and the three suspects were released. Some critics suggested that the federal and Michoacan state governments could have done more to prevent the attack because they had received some warning in the form of threats.
Godoy, who acknowledged that his office had received a bomb threat on Sept. 14, said he took additional security measures around Plaza Melchor Ocampo but was unable to prevent the attack. Other governors said they had also received threats, but no attacks were carried out. "As President Calderon has stated before, we are in a war against an army that does not have a face," Tabasco Gov. Andres Granier said in testimony before the Chamber of Deputies on Sept. 17. Granier, whose state has seen a surge in drug-related violence in recent years (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26), said other governors told him that they had received threats.

In Mexico City, Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, accompanied by the governors of three nearby states, also condemned the attacks and called for unity during an address to the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF). "This is the moment to act with boldness to strengthen our institutions," said the mayor. "We must make clear that our institutions and the integrity of the state are above any political differences we might have."

Also attending the address were Gov. Amalia Garcia of Zacatecas, a member of Ebrard's center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and Govs. Enrique Pena Nieto of Mexico state and Miguel Osorio Chong of Hidalgo, both of whom are affiliated with the other major opposition party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The attacks came just as the Chamber of Deputies was deliberating on President Felipe Calderon's 2009 budget proposal, which places a high emphasis on security and anti-crime measures (see SourceMex, 2007-09-17).

Even before the attacks, legislators from all three parties appeared inclined to meet Calderon's requests to boost anti-crime spending. Among the proposals offered thus far was an increase in funding for organizations such as the Centro de Investigacion y Seguridad Nacional (CISEN). "We are going to emphasize two areas, public safety and social policies," said Deputy Cristian Castano, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN).

**Did police aid the perpetrators?**

As part of the investigations, authorities were also looking into allegations that Morelia municipal police officers might have helped the attacker or attackers escape.

The Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario reported that authorities were reviewing footage provided by the Quadratin news agency that implies either direct involvement or negligence by police officers in allowing a possible suspect to escape. There is also the possibility that police played a more significant role in helping plan and carry out the attack.

The possibility of police participation in drug-related crime is a concern nationwide but is especially worrisome in Michoacan state, where organizations such as the Zetas have helped corrupt entire police departments (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26). At the national level, police officers around the country have been linked to crimes such as kidnapping and extortion (see SourceMex, 2008-09-03). A recent report published in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior said at least 56 of the kidnappers arrested since 2001 were active or former members of a police department or the military.
The report, citing statistics from the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica (SSP), said that, even though military or police form only a small percentage of the 897 kidnappers arrested to date, their involvement is of concern. "The ability to handle high-caliber weapons, intervention tactics, and personal-defense training are among the skills that they have brought to the kidnapping gangs," said the report. According to the SSP, 101 kidnappers were arrested in the first six months of 2008, 12 of whom had some police or military affiliation.

The statistics do not take into account the Zetas, who are known to participate in kidnappings and murders as part of their functions as protectors for the Gulf cartel. The Zetas recently formed their own drug-trafficking organization that acts semi independently from the Gulf cartel (see SourceMex, 2008-05-21).

A report presented to the Mexican Congress offered even more dire statistics. The report, offered by Deputy Eduardo de la Torre, said that at least 300,000 of the country's 377,000 federal, state, and municipal police officers had been corrupted by organized crime. "We have 21,000 federal agents, 203,000 state-level officers, and 153,000 municipal police, and legislative studies indicate that at least 80% have been corrupted," said De la Torre, a member of the PAN.

The high level of corruption is attributed at least in part to the low pay that most officers receive. Many are lured into criminal activates like the drug trade and kidnappings by the opportunity to supplement their incomes. Officials say they would like to boost the pay for officers, but tight budgets will not allow more than modest increases.

In Michoacan state, officials are trying other incentives, such as subsidies for housing. In an innovative program, the Godoy government has entered into a partnership with private developer Inmobiliaria y Promotora de Vivienda Digna (INPROVIDI) to provide low-cost new homes to thousands of police officers, prison guards, and other qualified state employees.

Under the program, the state is providing the land outside Morelia, while INPROVIDI is constructing the homes, working in conjunction with two private mortgage lenders. One of the benefits of the program is that it gives officers the opportunity to set down roots. "Once a police officer understands that it means more to have a home, to set down roots, than to receive a bribe albeit three times his salary they're going to think twice about being corrupt," INPROVIDI president Jesus Perez told the Associated Press.

Experts' opinions are divided on whether the program could reduce corruption significantly. For example, Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch (HRW), praised the program as "innovative," but also warned that authorities would still have to implement severe sanctions to reduce corruption. Others, like George Grayson, a Mexico analyst at William and Mary College in Virginia, argue that the program will do little to cut corruption among police in Mexico. "The police are incurably corrupt, and I don't see any way around it," said Grayson. Despite the skepticism, there is an effort to extend the program to other parts of Mexico. Perez said INPROVIDI has begun discussions with other states to determine whether they would be interested in implementing a similar program.