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Airplane Crash Kills Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino

by LADB Staff
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There was no shortage of conspiracy theories in the aftermath of the airplane crash that killed Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino, former drug prosecutor Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, and several other officials in early November. Initial investigations indicate that pilot error and not foul play or bad weather were responsible for the crash in Mexico City.

Mourino played a key role in President Felipe Calderon's war against drug traffickers, and his death could have an impact on this effort. Calderon moved fairly quickly to fill the top post at the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB), naming former legislator Fernando Francisco Gomez Mont to replace Mourino. Gomez Mont's selection was somewhat of a surprise, since his name had not surfaced on the short list of candidates for the SEGOB post.

Aircraft falls near busy intersection

Mourino, Santiago Vasconcelos, and three other SEGOB officials were returning to Mexico City from a ceremony in San Luis Potosi state when their Learjet went down in the Lomas de Chapultepec section of the Mexican capital. The five passengers, along with the pilot, co-pilot and a flight attendant, all died in the crash. The accident, which occurred near two of Mexico City's busiest thoroughfares, the Paseo de la Reforma and the Periferico highway, also killed at least six people on the ground and destroyed 20 cars.

Official reports said 40 injuries occurred at the site of the crash, including 20 victims who suffered severe burns and required hospitalization. Mourino and Santiago Vasconcelos had traveled to San Luis Potosi to sign an anti-crime protocol with the administration of Gov. Marcelo de los Santos, a member of Calderon's governing center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Santiago Vasconcelos had recently led the government's organized-crime unit (Subprocuraduria de Investigacion Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada, SIEDO), which is in charge of prosecuting drug-related crimes.

Santiago Vasconcelos left his post at SIEDO in August to head a judicial-reform commission. Mourino, who was only 37, was considered a rising star in Mexican politics, moving to the top post in SEGOB after serving at the Office of the Secretary of the Presidency. "Mexico loses a great Mexican, intelligent, loyal, committed to his values, honest, a hard-worker," Calderon told reporters.

Despite the accolades, Mourino's appointment to replace Francisco Ramirez Acuna as interior secretary in early 2008 was filled with controversy, with critics questioning his experience and qualifications. There were also charges Mourino used his influence while a member of the Chamber of Deputies to push the state-run oil company PEMEX to favor relatives in awarding contracts. Mourino denied that he exerted any influence in those decisions, and a subsequent investigation by the Chamber of Deputies cleared him of any wrongdoing. "Even though he was exonerated of
these charges, Mourino was never able to convince detractors that he was clean," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada.

Other clouds also hung over Mourino's appointment, including questions about his qualifications to hold such a high post. Since the interior secretary is often seen as second in command in the executive branch, the inevitable questions arose about whether Mourino, who was born in Spain, could legally head the government if he had to step in for Calderon (see SourceMex, 2008-01-23).

Conspiracy theories abound

The presence of Mourino and Santiago Vasconcelos on the airplane attracted widespread speculation that the drug cartels had somehow managed to sabotage the aircraft. In his short tenure as interior secretary, Mourino assumed a very visible role in Calderon's campaign against drug traffickers (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-30). The campaign turned violent, as drug kingpins struck back at the government by killing law-enforcement officers, soldiers, and elected officials involved in the effort (see SourceMex, 2008-05-21 and 2008-11-05).

Communications and Transportation Secretary Luis Tellez said, however, that there was no immediate evidence of foul play in the crash because there was no midair explosion and no emergency calls from the pilot. "So far, we do not have any indications that suggest a hypothesis other than that it was an accident," said the secretary, adding however that nothing was being ruled out. Tellez also ruled out weather conditions as a cause of the accident, since good flying conditions were reported in the area at the time of the crash.

Furthermore, the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma pointed out that the government aircraft, a Learjet 45 acquired in the US, appeared to be in good condition and recent inspections had found no problems. "Documents in possession of the Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transportes indicate that the aircraft had passed all its inspections and its documents were all in order," said Reforma.

SCT officials are looking primarily at the possibility of pilot error or turbulence from a nearby larger aircraft as causes of the accident. They said the flight plan would have had the aircraft turning east toward the Mexico City international airport, but the plane was traveling northward when it crashed. "This clearly proves what we had believed, that there was an abrupt loss of control," said investigator Gilberto Lopez. Still, the Calderon government pledged to conduct "all necessary investigations" to determine the cause of the accident.

The administration has enlisted the help of three British investigators and the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to examine flight data from the two black boxes retrieved from the plane. In addition, Learjet has sent its own team of investigators. The accident is the latest in a series of mishaps involving official airplanes, helicopters, and other aircraft used by the various departments of the executive branch. One of those accidents also claimed the life of a Cabinet member in 2005. In that incident, Public Safety Secretary Ramon Martin Huerta was traveling with other law-enforcement officials when his helicopter crashed in poor weather (see SourceMex, 2005-10-05).
Despite the government's assurances that there was no foul play, at least some of the public seems to think otherwise. A public survey by independent pollster Maria de las Heras indicated that 56% of respondents thought that the crash was the result of sabotage. "It's not going to be easy to sell the public on the explanation that the crash was an accident," said de las Heras. "In the midst of the violence that our country has experienced recently, no one can fault the public for suspecting that drug traffickers might be behind the tragedy that claimed the lives of Interior Secretary Mourino and Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos."

Some observers suggested that Santiago Vasconcelos might have been a bigger target than Mourino. "It was inevitable. The former SIEDO director...was under threat," said Francisco Garfias, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "It was only in January when the government detained several suspects who said they had been hired to kill him."

But other polls indicate that some members of the public also see the accident theory as plausible, as evidenced by a survey by Ulises Beltran y Asociados. In that poll, about 51% of respondents agreed that the crash was an accident. Pollsters said the percentage matched a poll conducted three years ago after Ramon Martin Huerta's helicopter went down. Still, some political observers expect the doubts to remain. "There is no evidence that this was a plot, but there also is no evidence to completely rule out this theory," said wrote columnist Diego Petersen Farah in the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

Petersen said the government must clarify the situation. "Because of the violence experienced by our country, it is fundamental to fully ascertain what really occurred," he said. Mourino replaced with controversial figure Calderon did not wait long to replace Mourino in the top post at SEGOB, but the appointment was not without controversy.

In a somewhat surprising move, the president named Gomez Mont, a criminal lawyer and former member of the Chamber of Deputies, as interior secretary. Like most on the short list that circulated days after the accident, Gomez Mont is a member of the governing PAN. The difference is that he was not on the list of names rumored to be under consideration for the post. That list included Public Education Secretary Josefina Vazquez Mota, PAN president German Martinez, PAN Deputy Hector Larios, PAN Sen. Diodoro Carrasco, and deputy interior secretary Abraham Gonzalez Uyeda. Gonzalez Uyeda became the acting interior secretary after Mourino's death.

Other rumors circulated that Calderon was considering a member of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) for the post. "Many believe that the time has come for the Calderon administration to enter into a sort of 'co-government' mode, which the president has pledged to the PRI," said Ricardo Aleman, a columnist with the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. Aleman said Carrasco would have been an ideal choice because the senator served in the PRI before switching to the PAN.

In the end, Calderon went with Gomez Mont, which attracted criticisms that the president was resorting to political favoritism rather than picking the most qualified individual for the job. "This is another reflection that Calderon does not know how to manage the portfolio of SEGBO and its tasks
relations with parties, elections, the anti-drug fight and all that this implies in the governability of the country," said Juan Antonio Crespo, a political analyst at the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE).

Others fustigated the president for selecting an individual with so much baggage for such an important post. Gomez Mont, who was close to the enigmatic PAN legislative leader Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, was the defense lawyer for several public figures accused of corruption, including Raul Salinas de Gortari and bankers Carlos Cabal Peniche and Jorge Lankenau (see SourceMex, 2000-07-12 and 2003-07-16). Gomez Mont was also the attorney for Rogelio Montemayor Seguy, a former PEMEX director accused of using money from the company to fund the presidential campaign of Francisco Labastida in the infamous Pemexgate case (see SourceMex, 2002-01-30 and 2002-05-15). Thanks to the efforts of his legal team, which included Gomez Mont, Montemayor only received a fine instead of a jail sentence (see SourceMex, 2003-07-30 and 2005-05-18).

Another of Gomez Mont's prominent clients was businessman Javier Moreno del Valle, who failed in efforts to keep giant television network TV Azteca from taking over the frequencies assigned to his Canal 40 operations (see SourceMex, 2004-10-13). Some of the strongest criticisms of Gomez Mont came from the left, with Sen. Ricardo Monreal of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) accusing Gomez Mont of representing "some of the most corrupt, rotten, and reprehensible people in the country."

Others questioned Calderon's change of direction. "A day after Calderon exalted the 'pragmatic idealism' of young PAN members like the deceased Juan Camilo Mourino, he surprised everyone with the designation of Gomez Mont," said La Jornada. "This was a departure from the first phase of his administration, which was to integrate close loyal collaborators and friends into his inner circle, no matter what their experience."

But many PRI legislators supported the choice of Gomez Mont, including Deputy Cesar Duarte, president of the Chamber of Deputies. Duarte said the new interior secretary has "the proper credentials" for the current legislative climate, and his appointment should strengthen the dialogue between the legislative and executive branches.

Calderon also defended his choice of Gomez Mont, saying the new interior secretary has the skill and experience to continue the government's drug-interdiction efforts and to oversee judicial reforms approved this year (see SourceMex, 2008-03-12). "He will continue the negotiation, daily interchange, and respectful relations with the different political forces of the country," Calderon said.

Supporters also lauded Gomez Mont's tenure in the Chamber of Deputies in the 1990s, where he sponsored bills related to human rights and justice. In his first address to reporters, Gomez Mont promised to work closely with all political parties to wage an effective war against organized crime and improve the country's judicial system. When asked about the criticisms regarding his infamous clients, Gomez Mont acknowledged that he defended controversial figures, but said he always acted in a professional manner and "without a hidden agenda."