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LADB Staff

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Human-rights Caravan Ambushed In Remote Area Of Oaxaca State; Incident Has Implications On Upcoming Elections

by LADB Staff

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On April 27, a caravan carrying food and supplies to the remote community of San Juan Copala in Oaxaca state was ambushed, and two members of the delegation were killed in the attack. While some observers said the violence was the result of conflicts among three factions of Triqui Indians who inhabit this remote area of central Oaxaca, the conflict has wider political implications that have spilled over to the upcoming July 5 gubernatorial election. The perpetrators are said to be the paramilitary group Unión de Bienestar Social para la Región Triqui (UBISORT), which has been closely associated with Gov. Ulises Ruiz Ortiz's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Several members of the caravan, including murdered activist Alberta Beatriz Cariño Trujillo, were linked to the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), which has been in conflict with the Ruiz government. In addition to Cariño Trujillo, Finnish citizen Jyri Jaakkola died in the attack.

He was one of five European human rights activists invited to Oaxaca to document the suffering of people reportedly living without schools, electricity, and food. Four other people were injured in the attack, including David Cilia, a reporter from *Contralínea* magazine. Cilia and fellow reporter Erika Ramírez disappeared after the attack but were found a few days later. Sources said the 27-member caravan was traveling in four cars with food and other items for San Juan Copala, which was experiencing shortages because the conflict in its vicinity had cut off supplies to the community. The four vehicles in the caravan were clearly marked with signs stating that press and international observers were on board. Several delegation members said the snipers appeared to be waiting for the caravan. "You could see armed men from about 500 meters," said Gabriela Jiménez Rodríguez, an APPO leader who traveled with the group.

Region known for extreme violence While details surrounding the attack are surfacing slowly, local experts say violence has been prevalent in the Triqui region for at least 40 years because of mistrust among three groups: UBISORT, Movimiento Unificador de la Lucha Triqui (MULT), and Movimiento Unificador de la Lucha Triqui Independiente (MULTI). UBISORT is said to have the protection and implicit support of the PRI, and critics say the group attacked the caravan because the delegation included primarily members of APPO and Section 22 of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), which have clashed with the Ruiz administration (SourceMex, August 02, 2006, November 01, 2006 and October 29, 2008). Among the APPO activists were members of the Red Mexicana de Afectados por la Minería (REMA) and the Centro de Apoyo Comunitario Trabajando Unidos (CACTUS). Beatriz Cariño was a member of CACTUS. The five Europeans, who were activists from Germany, Italy, and Belgium, were all involved with human rights groups. Jaakkola, a member of the Finnish civil rights group Uusi Tuuli (New Wind), had traveled to Mexico, partly with funding from the Foreign Ministry in Helsinki, to assist local communities with agriculture-related endeavors.

The Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) has launched a full investigation to determine the circumstances that led to the ambush, which means that the perpetrators would be subject to federal charges. UBISORT claims that the group is being wrongly accused and that MULTI actually conducted the ambush to pin it on UBISORT. "They want to claim the role of martyrs," UBISORT said in a communiqué. María Sanabia, director of the local newspaper *A Diario*, said there is strong mutual suspicion among the three Triqui groups that inhabit the area. Many times the groups attack each other, and in some cases two groups direct their animosity at the third group. "UBISORT and MULTI are in conflict with MULT, which has managed to get one of its members elected to the state legislature," said Sanabia. "This has made the others nervous because they think it could open the door for the [state] government to take over the area." "The violence in the Triqui region is often described as 'uncontrollable' because of the total absence of justice...where the right of an individual to take justice into his own hands is justified implicitly," said the Comisión Civil Internacional de Observación por los Derechos Humanos (CCIODH), based in Barcelona, Spain. "Multiple aggressions have never been investigated or sanctioned, which has allowed paramilitary groups to operate with total impunity."

While the connection between the attackers and the PRI is still under investigation, observers say there is no denying that the Ruiz administration has a clear record of repression in Oaxaca. "Ulises Ruiz Ortiz has the highest rate of violence, social repression, human rights violations, and assassination of social leaders within his borders of any governor in Mexico," said the Agencia de noticias Proceso (apro). "The latest case involved the attack on the caravan that included international observers, which had been sent to the Triqui region to document human rights abuses." "Criminalization of social protest is the undeniable mark of the Ulises Ruiz government," said apro, in reference to the state government's response to teacher strikes in 2006 and 2007. "From the time he took office until last year, his record is chilling 62 deaths for political considerations, more than 500 arrests because of social protests, and 10 people disappeared." It is in the climate of violence that two local women radio journalists, Teresa Bautista and Felicitas Martínez, were killed in an ambush in San Juan de Copala in 2007, presumably by paramilitaries linked to Gov. Ruiz (SourceMex, April 30, 2008). Incident has implications on tight gubernatorial race Charges that Ruiz had a hand in the violence in the Triqui region have become a focal point in the Oaxaca gubernatorial election, which is expected to be extremely tight. Eviel Pérez Magaña of the PRI, considered Ruiz's hand-picked successor, will face Gabino Cué Monteagudo, who is representing a wide coalition that includes the center-left Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

Cué lost the 2004 election to Ruiz by a very small margin in a race marked by charges of fraud and irregularities (SourceMex, August 04, 2004). Cué is intent on winning the election this year. Not only has he assembled the same coalition that almost led him to victory in 2004, but he is also taking every opportunity to attack Ruiz's record of repression and human rights violations. In an interview with W Radio, the coalition candidate was careful not to blame Ruiz directly for the ambush. "This is a very violent region...and we don't have all the information," said Cué. "But the caravan should have been protected. There is a great sense of arrogance, dishonesty, and irresponsibility on the part of the Oaxaca government." "The only way to resolve this conflict is to sit both sides down and look for mechanisms for intermediation," added the coalition candidate. Ruiz responded to the charges by turning the tables on Cué, accusing him and his supporters of fomenting violence in the Triqui

region. "Look at the names [of organizations] that are supporting the opposition candidate," said the Oaxaca governor. "These are people who have expressed support for APPO, which rather than offer proposals for transformation is instead endorsing violence."

The governor also called on the federal government to investigate whether the foreigners traveling to San Juan Copala were conducting activities incompatible with their visa status. "The government should expel any foreigners who are coming to Oaxaca to cause trouble." The war of words is a sign that the July 5 election is expected to again be extremely tight. Recent polls show different results. One survey, by Ipsos Public Affairs on April 17-21, shows Cué with 42% support compared with 35.8% for Pérez Magaña. A poll by Análisis de Resultados de Comunicación y Opinión Pública (ARCOP), conducted March 13-17 but only released in late April, showed the coalition candidate with 57% support compared with 40% for his PRI-PVEM rival. Conversely, a poll conducted by the Gabinete de Comunicación Estratégica (GCE) between the second and fourth weeks of April showed Pérez Magaña with 44.3% support, Cué with 39.8%, and Irma Piñeyro Arias of the Partido Nueva Alianza (PANAL) with 12.8%. And another set of polls by Consulta Mitofsky looked at support for the various candidates in several municipalities rather than statewide. In almost all cases, Pérez Magaña was ahead. For example, in a Mitofsky poll conducted April 10-12 in Oaxaca city, the state's largest municipality, the PRI-PVEM candidate received 41% of support compared with 29% for Cué.

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