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Powerful Politician Diego Fernández De Cevallos Disappears, But No One Takes Credit For Apparent Kidnapping

by Carlos Navarro

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The apparent kidnapping of influential politician Diego Fernández de Cevallos Ramos raised concerns that no one in Mexico, even an ex-presidential candidate, was immune to the rash of abductions that have plagued Mexico for many years. Fernández de Cevallos, who represented the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in the 1994 election, disappeared without a trace on May 15. His truck was found abandoned in a remote area of Querétaro state near his ranch, with traces of blood evident in the interior of the vehicle. There were no ransom notes, and 11 days after the disappearance no group or group of individuals had come forward to take credit for the apparent abduction. In the wake of the apparent kidnapping, the Mexican Senate which approved anti-kidnapping legislation before going on recess pushed for a special session so that the Chamber of Deputies could consider the measure. The lower house was less enthusiastic about scheduling a special meeting during the summer months.

The disappearance of Fernández de Cevallos raised fears that politicians had become the target of organized crime. The incident occurred just three days after José Mario Guajardo Varela, a PAN candidate for mayor in the community of Valle Hermoso in Tamaulipas state was gunned down, along with his son and an employee. Another candidate, Joel Arteaga Vázquez, who was running for a local legislative position in the community of Calera in Zacatecas state, was also gunned down within a week of Fernández de Cevallos' disappearance.

This is not the first time that political candidates have been targeted, with the 1994 murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio topping the list of political assassinations ([SourceMex, March 30, 1994](#)). There were suspicions of some drug connections in the Colosio murder, but authorities have never been able to fully explain the circumstances that led to the killing of the popular politician during a campaign rally in Tijuana.

There is renewed concern that the drug cartels might have become indirectly involved in the electoral process, with important gubernatorial elections scheduled on July 4. Some suggest that drug-trafficking organizations might be behind the murder of Guajardo Varela, especially since the murder occurred in Tamaulipas, a state that has suffered from extreme drug-related violence in the past several years.

Motive for disappearance still unclear

There is no direct evidence that drug cartels or any other group associated with illicit activities or with the guerrilla movements in Mexico were responsible for the disappearance of Fernández de Cevallos. This is because no one has claimed credit for abducting the powerful politician.

One guerrilla organization that has operated in Querétaro state, the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR), immediately issued a statement denying any involvement in the disappearance. In a

statement sent to the press, the EPR said it "felt the pain" of the Fernández de Cevallos family. But the organization also suggested that Fernández de Cevallos' notoriety led to the outpouring of concern by the government and other members of the establishment. If this had been a social activist, "the case would have been treated with disdain," the EPR said.

There were other mysterious factors related to the apparent abduction. While no group claimed responsibility for kidnapping the powerful politician, a photograph of a blindfolded man with Fernández de Cevallos' likeness began to circulate on the Internet via social networking media like Twitter. The government could not immediately confirm whether the man in the photograph was truly Fernández de Cevallos. Some experts at the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) raised the possibility that the photograph might be a hoax because some features were not consistent with those of Fernández de Cevallos.

Still, shortly after the appearance of the Twitter message, the PGR said in a terse message that it was backing off the investigation to comply with a request from the family. Officials did not offer any other details, and the family did not say whether there had been any contact with possible kidnappers. "We'll handle the negotiations," said a statement signed by Diego Fernández de Cevallos Gutiérrez, son of the politician.

The government has been criticized for its handling of several aspects of the case, including communications with the public. Columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio compared the spokespersons for the Calderón government to Inspector Closeau, the fumbling character in the Pink Panther movie series. "They provide disinformation, then they pretend to inform, then they confuse us and feed us rumors. They have lost credibility," wrote Riva Palacio.

Beyond the lack of clear communication, the inability to solve the case has made the Calderón administration look bad. "All citizens understand this lesson," wrote Juan Carlos Sánchez Magallán in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excelsior*. "The criminals are more intelligent, more skilled, and more powerful than the federal government and the three institutions involved in this case, the defense, Navy-Army, and public safety secretariats," said the columnist.

Senate approves anti-kidnap law, but measure pending in lower house

Fernández de Cevallos' disappearance also had some implications for the Congress. The Mexican Senate, which on the last day of its legislative session on April 30 approved a broad-ranging anti-kidnapping initiative, pushed for the Chamber of Deputies to take a similar action. The Senate measure modified a plan sent by Calderón in mid-February that would, among other things, give federal authorities broad powers to monitor suspected kidnappers, including tapping telephones. The president's plan also proposed giving kidnappers the maximum jail sentences allowed by law and allowing victims the opportunity to testify against their captors.

Senators added several provisions to the bill, including a special fund (Fondo Para la Reparación del Daño y Atención a Víctimas) to provide financial assistance to families of kidnapping victims. Families often have to surrender large sums of money in exchange for the release of their kidnapped relative.

PRI Sen. Jesús Murillo Karam said another major benefit of the Senate initiative is that it mandates better coordination among local, state, and federal authorities.

Senators from the three major parties cited an urgent need for Mexico to update its anti-kidnapping laws and proposed that a special legislative session be called for this legislation and other important measures, such as anti-trust legislation. The PAN and the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) did not specify a time frame, but the PRI asked that a special session not take place until after the July 4 gubernatorial and state legislative elections.

PRI members in the lower house were more reluctant, suggesting that the issues to be debated had not been specified by the appropriate commissions. "The first thing that these commissions must do is to identify the themes that we know are important and others that should be added," said PRI Deputy Francisco Rojas Gutiérrez.

The chairs of the various committees said they would work on identifying the legislation that needed to go to a special session but noted that work would not be completed until the end of June at the earliest. And even then, there is no guarantee that the Congress will actually agree to hold a special session. If legislators do not meet during the summer, initiatives like the anti-kidnapping law will have to wait until the Congress convenes again in September.

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