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Stark Contrast between Kidnapping of Prominent Politician Diego Fernández de Cevallos and Abductions of Central American Immigrants

by Carlos Navarro

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Two different kidnap situations attracted headlines in Mexico during December. The first case involved Diego Fernández de Cevallos, one of Mexico's most enigmatic politicians, who was freed by kidnappers just before the Christmas holidays after vanishing in May 2010. The high-profile kidnapping received extensive media coverage during the seven months in which the former presidential candidate from the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) was in captivity.

The intense scrutiny of the Fernández de Cevallos case was a stark contrast to the kidnappings of Central American migrants in southern Mexico, which usually fly under the media radar. One case, which occurred at about the same time as the release of Fernández de Cevallos, would have gone unnoticed had it not been for protests by Salvadoran government officials.

Family pays huge ransom for release of Fernández de Cevallos

Fernández de Cevallos' disappearance was shrouded in mystery, after 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, in the immediate aftermath of the disappearance, no group or individual came forward to take credit for the apparent abduction ([SourceMex, May 26, 2010](#)). In the ensuing months, several videos showing the ex-presidential candidate appeared on the Internet, but the line from authorities was that they could not confirm their authenticity.

The strong grip that drug cartels have in Mexico prompted speculation that drug-trafficking organizations had been responsible for Fernández de Cevallos' abduction. But the PAN politician, who was released on Dec. 20 after his family paid a large ransom, indicated that the kidnappers were actually linked to the little-known guerrilla organization La Red de Transformación Global. Fernández de Cevallos, commonly known as Jefe Diego, did not offer many details about his captors, suggesting only that they were ideologically motivated and viewed him as "an enemy of their cause."

Reports surfaced that the kidnappers were linked with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), which led an uprising in Chiapas on Jan. 1, 1994 ([SourceMex, Jan. 12, 1994](#)). The reports were based on a statement signed by someone using the nickname El Guerrero Balam, who said the Red de Transformación Global was affiliated with La Otra Campaña, the EZLN's political-action arm. El Guerrero Balam also claimed to be a confidant of longtime EZLN leader Subcomandante Marcos.

In the statement, El Guerrero Balam said Fernández de Cevallos, who was a Senate leader when the Congress passed a watered-down indigenous-rights bill in 2001 ([SourceMex, May 2, 2001](#)), was "one of the main enemies of our project" to secure autonomy for indigenous peoples.

The suggestion that the Zapatistas were involved in the kidnapping was immediately disputed on various fronts, and there were no other statements to support the claims. On the contrary, the Web site Enlace Zapatista, considered the EZLN's official online communications venue, immediately dismissed the comments, emphasizing that La Otra Campaña is a political, civic, and peaceful movement that does not need to resort to kidnappings to fund its operations. "[Abductions] are activities that are contrary to Zapatista principles," said .

Prominent politicians also denied that the Zapatistas might have been involved in Fernández de Cevallos' abduction, including Deputy José Narro Céspedes, who chairs the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA), a congressional committee that deals with dialogue with the EZLN.

Chiapas Gov. Juan José Sabines Guerrero said in a message sent on Twitter that it was "irresponsible" to connect the Zapatistas with the abduction of former Sen. Fernández de Cevallos. "If there is a message that the Zapatistas want to send in these times of violence, it is one of prudence, peace, and political responsibility," said Sabines.

Fernández de Cevallos had no immediate comment about the Zapatista links. From all accounts, the politician had fairly cordial relations with his captors and even issued a statement after his release saying he forgave them. "As for the kidnappers, of course as a man of faith I've pardoned (them), and as a citizen I believe the authorities have a job still to do," he said.

There were reports that Fernández de Cevallos helped negotiate his release, convincing his captors to accept a much smaller amount, reported at about US\$30 million, rather than the US\$100 million they were demanding initially.

Mass abductions of Central American migrants get less attention

While Fernández de Cevallos' abduction was the subject of numerous newspaper headlines, television reports, and posts on YouTube and other Web sites, the kidnapping of Central and South American migrants has attracted only sporadic attention. While these abductions are common, only a few cases are reported. The perpetrators are commonly the drug cartels, primarily the Zetas, who attempt to extort money from relatives of the victims in the US. In some cases, the victims are used in the drug-smuggling operations.

Some of the kidnappings come to light when Mexican authorities happen to stumble on the safe houses where the migrants are kept, particularly in southern states like Chiapas, Veracruz, and Oaxaca. This was the case in November, when Mexican authorities rescued more than 100 migrants being kept in a house in Chiapas.

In many cases, the victims are killed when they refuse to cooperate or when relatives are unable to come up with ransom money. And even the murders go unnoticed unless one or more victims manage to escape and tell authorities, as was the case with a recent incident in Tamaulipas state in September 2010 ([SourceMex, Sept. 8, 2010](#)).

A mass abduction in December garnered the attention of the government and the media because of the potential for diplomatic friction between President Felipe Calderón and Central American governments, particularly Honduras and El Salvador. The circumstances surrounding the kidnappings, which are reported to have occurred on Dec. 16 in Oaxaca, were not widely known, at least not initially.

The few reports that circulated suggested that a gang—thought to be the Zetas—stopped a freight train near the community of Chahuites, between Ixtepec and Matías Romero in Oaxaca state. The train was allowed to proceed after the attackers kidnapped 50 Central American passengers, including 30 men, 15 women, and five children, who sneaked into Mexico from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Freight trains are a common form of transportation for migrants who want to reach the US-Mexico border in an attempt to cross over to the US ([SourceMex, Aug. 29, 2007](#)).

Mexican immigration officials initially denied knowledge of the incident, saying that "no evidence exists of the train having been blocked or held up by any group." But word of the incident had already filtered to officials in El Salvador and Honduras, which lodged a strong protest to Mexican authorities for failing to take action.

El Salvador later filed a complaint about a second kidnapping in Oaxaca, in which nine of its citizens were taken from a train, allegedly by the Zetas, on Dec. 22. The incident was reported by a handful of migrants who fled their captors, according to information from the Salvadoran Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.

"We believe you can't deal with these problems by ignoring them," Salvadoran Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez told a news conference. "Rather, they should be recognized and thoroughly investigated."

The complaints forced the Calderón administration to acknowledge that the abduction had occurred. It also prompted an investigation from the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH), which promised to take all appropriate actions at its disposal. "The CNDH is helping the migrants who were involved in the incidents that occurred on the Ixtepec-Matías Romero stretch, Oaxaca," the commission said in late December.

The incidents have also led the Calderón government to admit that its policies regarding Central American migrants were severely lacking. "We not only lack a system to analyze the information, but the number of kidnappings is underreported," said a recent report. The report recognized that collecting information is hampered by the reluctance of undocumented immigrants to file complaints. Many fear either deportation or revenge from the drug cartels.

In 2010, the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) received more than 220 complaints about abductions, but many cases are not reported.

More importantly, the acknowledgement has opened avenues of cooperation between Mexico and Central American governments. For example, Martínez said his country could work with Mexican officials to investigate reports that Salvadoran gangs, known as maras, were colluding with the Zetas and other organizations in the kidnappings. "We believe that it is necessary to share certain information on a personal basis," said Martínez, who added that deputy foreign minister Juan José García would meet with Mexican officials during the second week of January.

Among other concerns that Mexican authorities must address are reports that members of organized crime have infiltrated government-sponsored shelters for Central American migrants in southern Mexico. "There is a need for a holistic strategy to deal with the problem, including input from the government and civil society," said the report.

Beyond developing a system to collect information on kidnappings and respond more quickly, the government has begun an overhaul of the INM, which is considered highly corrupt and at times incompetent. The negative publicity surrounding the massacre of migrants in September resulted in the resignation of Cecilia Romero as INM commissioner. She was replaced by Salvador Beltrán del Río.

In early January, the government took further steps in the overhaul of the INM, including dismissing several top directors because of corruption. The migrants not only have to face organized gangs but also abuse from immigration agents. In 2007, 12 migrants almost suffocated in a truck, where they were held by INM agents who had demanded bribes.

But just as the number of Mexican migrants going to the US has diminished or leveled off in recent years because of increased security and a weak US economy ([SourceMex, Sept. 30, 2009](#)), the same seems to be true for Central Americans. The INM said only slightly more than 65,000 undocumented migrants from other countries, primarily Central America, were detained in 2009, compared with more than 226,000 in 2005.

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