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New Revelations Raise Questions about Role of President Barack Obama's Administration in Operation Fast and Furious

by Carlos Navarro

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Two new controversial pieces of information emerged in the conflict between the US and Mexico regarding a botched plan by US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to track the flow of US weapons into Mexico. The first piece of information stems from allegations that US Attorney General Eric Holder might have known about the Fast and Furious operation, by which the Phoenix office of the ATF purposely introduced weapons into Mexico in order to trace their movement ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011](#)). Those weapons were tracked to several killings, including of some US officials. The second revelation, which further angered Mexico, was a report that the ATF Phoenix office carried out a similar operation to introduce guns into Mexico during the administration of ex-President George W. Bush.

How much did Attorney General Holder know?

Initial reports once the Fast and Furious operation came to light indicated that this was a rogue operation conducted by the ATF office in Phoenix without the knowledge of Holder or White House officials. But investigators hired by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA), chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, and Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-IA), the leading Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, uncovered some electronic mail that suggests that Holder was receiving memos about the operation as far back as July 2010.

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In a subsequent congressional hearing, Issa repeated the question to Holder, asking him when he first learned of the ATF operation. "I'm not sure of the exact date," Holder replied. "But I probably heard about Fast and Furious for the first time over the last few weeks."

There is no conclusive proof that Holder knew what the ATF was up to in Phoenix. Justice Department officials told the media that Holder periodically is briefed on multiple investigations throughout the US and that the reports he received on Fast and Furious in July 2010 did not explicitly state that ATF agents were letting guns "walk" into Mexico via illegal sales to straw purchasers.

Some critics, including Rep. Issa, insist that Holder knew and approved of the operation and that he should submit his resignation. While the attorney general has thus far escaped direct repercussions, investigations by the US Department of Justice and congressional committees have

led to the reassignment of Kenneth Melson, the ATF acting director in Phoenix, and the resignation of the US Attorney for the District of Arizona Dennis Burke.

The congressional probe offered some insights into the method the ATF used to allow weapons to flow into Mexico, known as "gun walking," by which the agency purposely allowed licensed firearms dealers to sell weapons to illegal straw buyers, hoping to track the guns to Mexican drug-cartel leaders and arrest them. The problem is that the ATF appears to have lost track of more than 2,000 weapons, a large number of which were eventually traced to 170 violent incidents in Mexico. Some weapons were traced to the murders of several people in Mexico, as well as a US Border Patrol agent in Arizona in December 2010 and a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent in San Luis Potosí in February 2011 ([SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2011](#)).

US authorities also traced high-powered assault weapons introduced into Mexico via the Fast and Furious program to the home of José Antonio Torres Marrufo, a high-level leader for the Sinaloa cartel in Ciudad Juárez.

US investigators said the gun smugglers moved the guns quickly from Arizona to Texas and New Mexico to avoid detection. Roughly 100 assault weapons acquired under Fast and Furious were transported 350 miles from Phoenix to El Paso, Texas, and Columbus, New Mexico. The guns were then moved into Mexico through Juárez.

"These Fast and Furious guns were going to Sinaloans, and they are killing everyone down there," a US government source told the Los Angeles Times. "But that's only how many we know came through Texas. Hundreds more had to get through."

Mexican officials kept in dark

Mexican officials have long criticized the US for failing to curb the flow of high-caliber weapons into Mexico ([SourceMex, Nov. 28, 2007](#)), even though the US has implemented some limited measures in an attempt to halt the illegal movement of guns across the border ([SourceMex, March 5, 2008](#), and [Feb. 2, 2011](#)). But the direct participation of a US government entity in facilitating the trafficking of arms and the lack of communication with the Mexican government about the operation has created further indignation among federal and state officials.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Attorney General Marisela Morales said she first learned about Fast and Furious from news reports and was never fully briefed about the operation by US officials. "At no time did we know or were we made aware that there might have been arms trafficking permitted," said Morales, who was appointed to the job in April 2011 because of her tough and effective actions against organized crime ([SourceMex, April 6, 2011](#)). "In no way would we have allowed it, because it is an attack on the safety of Mexicans."

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Attorney General Marisela Morales said she first learned about Fast and Furious from news reports and was never fully briefed about the operation by US officials. "At no time did we know or were we made aware that there might have been arms trafficking permitted," said Morales, who was appointed to the job in April 2011 because of her tough and effective actions against organized crime ([SourceMex, April 6, 2011](#)). "In no way would we have allowed it, because it is an attack on the safety of Mexicans."

The Fast and Furious operation had a direct impact on Patricia González Rodríguez, who served as state attorney general during the administration of ex-Chihuahua Gov. José Reyes Baeza. The

former prosecutor's brother Mario González Rodríguez was kidnapped in 2010 and later killed with weapons traced to the Fast and Furious operation.

In an interview, Patricia González Rodríguez said she was not made aware of the Fast and Furious operation when she served as head of the Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado de Chihuahua (PGJE-Chihuahua). "The basic ineptitude of these officials [who ordered the Fast and Furious operation] caused the death of my brother and surely thousands more victims," González said.

President Felipe Calderón has also repeatedly denounced the operation but has been measured in his criticism of Obama and even the ATF. During an address to a primarily Mexican audience in Los Angeles in late September, Calderón credited Obama and the ATF for making good-faith efforts to try to reduce weapons smuggling into Mexico. But he also criticized the ATF for making an "enormous" mistake with the Fast and Furious operation. "There was one criminal that we captured who said the agents told him how to remove the tracking devices from the AK-47 and R15 weapons," said the Mexican president.

In a subsequent interview with the New York Times in mid-October, Calderón said he first learned about the operation through press reports. "I had just concluded a visit with President Obama, and while I was reviewing the results of my visit, reports about the operation appeared in the press," said the Mexican president.

Calderón said he was not sure whether Obama or anyone high up in his administration had prior knowledge about Fast and Furious, but if they did, he said he should have been informed about the operation during his visit to the White House. "Of course, I was angry because if they knew about it, they should have told me personally."

Similar operation during Bush administration

The congressional hearings involving Holder also revealed information about a similar gun-walking operation by the ATF office in Phoenix during the Bush years. The new revelations indicated that about 2,000 weapons were "walked" into Mexico in 2006 and 2007 through the so-called Operation Wide Receiver, and Mexican officials said many of those weapons later showed up at scores of crime scenes.

The revelations sparked strong criticisms in Mexico, raising questions on whether the US is actually helping combat criminal organizations south of the border or whether it is supporting them. "In sum, the gringo government has been sending weapons to Mexico in a premeditated and systematic manner, knowing that their destinations were Mexican criminal organizations," wrote columnist Manuel J. Jauregui in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

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Similar comments came from Federico La Mont, a columnist for El Sol de México. "Even though Mexico allocates billions of pesos to combat crime and restructure its law-enforcement agencies to create more transparency...there are no reciprocal actions for our neighbor north of the Rio Bravo," said LaMont.

Sen. Grassley also expressed indignation about the existence of the two gun-walking operations. "Whether it's Operation Fast and Furious, Operation Wide Receiver, or both, it's clear that guns were walked, and people high in the Justice Department knew about it," said Grassley. "There's no excuse for walking guns, and if there are more operations like this, Congress and the American people need to know."

Rep. Issa tried to make a distinction between Operation Fast and Furious and Operation Wide Receiver. He said the Bush-era initiative involved a "very small amount of weapons, much more intensive following." Furthermore, the California Republican suggested that the operation was done in consultation with the Mexican government, while Fast and Furious took place without the knowledge of Mexican officials.

Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa, however, disputed Rep. Issa's assertion that the Mexican government knew about the earlier operation. "We have no official information about this case, but I can tell that there is no way that the Mexican government would accept or had accepted any type of operation that implies the transfer of arms," Espinosa told reporters at a conference in Rome.

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