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Carlos Navarro

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President Felipe Calderón Acknowledges Threat Against His Life Early in His Administration

by Carlos Navarro

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Having lost two of his Cabinet secretaries to aircraft accidents during his administration, President Felipe Calderón revealed a bombshell on his 50th birthday: that he could have met the same fate during his early years in office. In a candid address to guests at his party, the president said military intelligence had warned him that there was information that the presidential airplane would be sabotaged during a planned tour of Tamaulipas state.

The threat prompted the government to order military specialists to conduct a thorough and careful inspection of the presidential plane and to take other extreme security measures. "Members of the armed forces deactivated the risk," journalist Carmen Aristegui said in her blog *Aristegui Noticias*. "Afterwards, [Calderón] flew to Tamaulipas, where he had scheduled a trip."

The president did not give a specific year when the threat occurred, but media speculation centered on 2007 or 2008.

The president said he did not let the threat change his plans. "I determined to make the trip once a broad security operation was in place," Calderón told the guests at his party, which included politicians from various political parties, business leaders, and Mexico's Olympic medalists.

But Calderón also revealed that, because of the threat, he prepared a taped message for his children. "I told them that, in case something happened to me, they should be certain that their father was performing the tasks that he deemed necessary."

Sinaloa cartel attempted to sabotage president's airplane

Calderón's intensive drug-interdiction campaign, which he announced in December 2006 and launched a few weeks later ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2007](#)), made him many enemies among the major drug-trafficking organizations. And the president had given vague hints throughout his administration of threats against his life.

Until Calderón's revelation at his birthday party, there had been no concrete information—just speculation—about various plots against the president. The closest confirmation came from Ramón Eduardo Pequeño García, who was the head of the anti-drug division of the federal police (Policía Federal, PF). Pequeño García said Dimas Díaz Ramos, one of the top financial officers of the Sinaloa cartel, also known as the Pacific cartel, said during an interrogation that the drug organization had a plan in the works to assassinate Calderón.

Díaz Ramos was close to Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, one of the most powerful leaders in the Sinaloa cartel. The cartel is led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera, who has eluded capture since escaping from a federal prison in 2001 ([SourceMex, Jan. 24, 2001](#)).

But there was also information that the Zetas drug cartel, which was in the process of consolidating its power in Mexico, also might have been targeting Calderón. "Military intelligence warned [the

president] that there was solid information that the Zetas criminal organization—which was making its definitive break from the Gulf cartel following the deportation of its leader Osiel Cárdenas to the US—was plotting against the president's airplane and the president's life," columnist Jorge Fernández Menéndez wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

But Pequeño García contends that the only organization that was threatening the president's life in the early years of his administration was the Sinaloa cartel. The cartel was under close surveillance by the US and Mexican governments because of threats not only against Calderón but also against federal buildings in Mexico and against US citizens. The threats were confirmed in a document released in 2009 by US Attorney General Eric Holder, who said Vicente Zambada (son of Ismael Zambada) and other leaders were planning the attacks.

In an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper *Milenio*, Pequeño García said the Sinaloa cartel decided to threaten Calderón in retaliation for the arrest of several of its members and the confiscation of almost US\$30 million in drug proceeds from the organization.

Two former interior secretaries died in crashes

While the cartels did not get to Calderón, there has been widespread suspicion that drug organizations might have been behind the aircraft accidents that claimed the lives of former interior secretaries Juan Camilo Mouriño in 2008 and Francisco Blake Mora three years later.

Mouriño, one of Calderón's closest friends and confidants, died when his aircraft, a Learjet 45, crashed as it was returning to Mexico City from a trip to San Luis Potosí ([SourceMex, Nov. 12, 2008](#)).

José Luis Santiago Vasconcelos, who was then the head of the Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (SIEDO), was also on board the plane. SIEDO is the unit of the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) in charge of investigating and prosecuting organized crime. Santiago Vasconcelos had been the target of at least two previous attempts against his life, presumably by the Zetas.

Blake Mora, who assumed the post of interior secretary following a successful tenure as prosecutor in Baja California, died when his helicopter crashed en route from Mexico City to Cuernavaca in Morelos state ([SourceMex, Nov. 16, 2011](#)).

The government classified both incidents as weather-related accidents, but this didn't stop speculation that the aircraft somehow might have been tampered with. "In the case of Blake Mora, the [government's] explanation of the causes of the accident is more convincing," said Fernández Menéndez. "But the doubts haven't been completely dispelled."

Fernández Menéndez said the deaths of Mouriño, Santiago Vasconcelos, and Blake Mora received strong attention because of their high profile. But he noted that there have been other incidents involving officials at various levels of government during the current administration. "Some of these are public, and some have been kept secret," said the columnist. "We know of the thousands of public-safety agents, soldiers, and sailors who have died fighting against the criminal organizations."

Fernández Menéndez said the timing of the revelation of the threats raised some questions because the president would seemingly have nothing to gain at this point in his presidency. "He reveals this information, at the end of his administration, because he knows that this will change nothing, because his style has never been to claim the role of victim, and because there is no use in denying

that something like this can happen," said the columnist. "Perhaps he did it as a warning of what the next occupant of Los Pinos [presidential palace] could expect."

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