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Mystery Shrouds Case of 18 Mexicans Arrested in Nicaragua on Drug-Trafficking Charges

by Carlos Navarro
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In late August, Nicaraguan authorities arrested 18 Mexicans in Managua on charges of drug trafficking. The arrests, while not routine, might have gone unnoticed if the suspects had not been using vehicles that displayed the logo of Televisa, Mexico’s largest television network. Subsequent investigations have centered on whether Televisa employees, including a high-level executive, and officials from Mexico City’s transit department (Secretaría de Transporte y Vialidad, Setravi) were involved in the operation.

The controversy began on Aug. 20, when Nicaraguan authorities detained the 18 Mexican citizens at a checkpoint a few miles past the border with Honduras. Inspectors discovered about US$9.2 million hidden inside the six vehicles, which appeared to be en route to Costa Rica. Traces of cocaine were found on the money, which was packaged in bundles and stashed away in the vans bearing the Televisa logo.

The 18 Mexican citizens, who were charged with money laundering and racketeering, remain in a Nicaraguan jail, where they are awaiting trial in December. In the interim, many questions remain, including whether any of the suspects actually worked for Televisa. The network has denied that any of those arrested were employees, but Nicaraguan authorities indicated that at least five of the suspects were actually employed by Televisa.

Authorities identified Raquel Alatorre Correa as a ringleader of the group. Alatorre carried credentials identifying her as a reporter for Televisa, based in Mérida, Yucatán state. "We can confirm that Raquel Alatorre Correa and at least three or four of those individuals who were traveling in the vans were employed by Televisa," said a note published in the Nicaraguan online news site El Cronista Digital. "We don’t know how the television giant is going to explain this."

False identifications

But prominent Televisa news anchor Joaquín López Dóriga said Nicaraguan police found several false identifications in Alatorre’s possession, which she used for a variety of activities ranging from drug trafficking to money laundering.

Televisa officials also contend that Alatorre used false documents to register five vehicles that were not part of the network’s fleet with Setravi. Network officials said they have asked Mexico City prosecutors to investigate the matter and whether there might have been any complicity by Setravi officials, including the agency’s director Armando Quintero.

"The irresponsible handling of Setravi data should be punished, especially if drug traffickers indeed infiltrated the agency," said syndicated columnist Raymundo Riva Palacio.

El Cronista Digital insisted that Alatorre was not only an employee of Televisa but also used her influence as the cousin of news personality Javier Alatorre, an anchor with rival television network TV Azteca, to lead the operation.
"Raquel is an influential person because she is a relative of Javier Alatorre Soria, one of the VIPs at TV Azteca, the company that had long been a rival of Televisa until the two companies entered into a joint venture on cellular telephones in 2011," said the online news outlet. Under the transaction, Televisa proposed acquiring a 50% share of cellular company Iusacell, owned by Grupo Azteca, but government regulators rejected the move (SourceMex, Feb. 8, 2012).

Others also point to Televisa’s complicity with at least some of the 18 Mexicans arrested in the case. Johana Fonseca González, attorney for detainee Juan Luis Torres, said Televisa provided credentials, a uniform, and funds for the work trip to Nicaragua. "Juan Luis Torres told me that he is indeed a driver for Televisa, that he was hired by Televisa officials, and that the logos on the trucks are legitimate," Fonseca said in an interview with prominent radio journalist Carmen Aristegui on MVS Noticias.

Nicaraguan authorities have emphasized that no one, including Televisa, will be exempt from their investigation as long as there are suspicions that the network was involved in some way in the operation. "When [the Mexican citizens] were brought into custody, they insisted they worked for Televisa," Armando Juárez, the Nicaraguan prosecutor in charge of the investigation, said in an interview with MVS Noticias. "Then some of them made phone calls supposedly to people at Televisa."

Mexico’s Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) is also looking into the case, in cooperation with Nicaraguan authorities. "Our offices, as well as prosecutors from Mexico City, are working together on this and sharing information," said Attorney General Marisela Morales.

The PGR's involvement is key because of the strong possibility that serious crimes like drug trafficking and money laundering might have been committed on Mexican soil. "The case has taken a more serious undertone because the vehicles might have been involved in drug-trafficking activities," said Riva Palacio.

There are reports that at least two of the people arrested took on identities of actual Televisa employees.

"Because of the confusion about the true identity of at least two of the 18 detained Mexicans, the PGR has asked for information from all federal agencies, the Mexico City government, and Nicaraguan authorities to determine the real identity of each person," said the Mexico City daily newspaper 24 Horas.

**Mexico City transportation department also under investigation**

Other questions remain, such as the identity of the drug cartels that might have been behind the operation and the strategic role that Nicaragua and Costa Rica are playing in organized crime's effort to bring drugs from Colombia to the US. Some observers have speculated that the Zetas might be behind the particular operation involving the Televisa vans, including the infiltration of Setravi.

"With only 60 days left in his term in office, and with aspirations of one day becoming Mexico's president, [outgoing] Mayor Marcelo Ebrard finds himself with a tack in the sole of his shoe: Armando Quintero," Carlos Blanco wrote in El Arsenal.net. "The incompetence of the Setravi director led to allegations that the Zetas had infiltrated the Mexico City government."
On Sept. 21, Morales issued a statement emphasizing that the 18 detainees had no relationship whatsoever with Televisa. "This would imply that the Zetas had infiltrated the Mexico City government," Jenaro Villamil wrote in a piece published by Agencia de Noticias Proceso (apro). "But she never explained why the other hypothesis, that the Zetas had infiltrated Televisa, is not valid."

Riva Palacio agreed. "Federal officials are saying that there is no infiltration by the drug cartels in the Mexico City government, but their line of investigation points otherwise," noted the columnist.

Others suggest that the Sinaloa cartel might be involved, as evidenced by the legal team hired to defend some of the Mexican citizens, whose trials in a court in Managua will begin on Dec. 3. The Managua daily newspaper 24 Horas says the Nicaraguan law firm Rojas-Urroz defended 11 persons connected to the Sinaloa cartel in 2007. Attorney Johanna Fonseca is defending six of the 18 Mexicans. "Our law firm was hired by someone outside Nicaragua," said lead attorney Ramón Rojas Méndez. "I cannot reveal the name of the person who hired us."

But other observers like Jorge Carrasco Araizaga of apro point out that the detained Mexicans could be linked with either the Zetas or the Sinaloa cartel. "For the criminal organizations in Mexico, Central America is not only the source of human capital, whether it is to extort people or to integrate them into their illegal activities," said Carrasco, "the region is also a refuge and an operations center for the trafficking of cocaine from South America to the US and Europe, as evidenced by the presence of both the Sinaloa cartel, led by Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán, and by the Zetas cartel."

"The drug traffickers use all sorts of strategies to conduct their activities," added Carrasco. "The use of vehicles belonging to private companies, or vehicles with falsified affiliations, is one of these strategies. In this case, Televisa is not the exception."

But the suspects’ use of journalistic credentials to mask drug-trafficking activities has raised some troubling questions on whether the integrity of the press has been violated. Just as troubling is the question of whether someone employed by Televisa was using the network to coordinate drug-trafficking activities. Noticias MVS said the Mexican government informed Nicaraguan authorities that a legitimate journalist had been scheduled to travel with the group but was replaced by an unknown person at the last minute.

"The information has raised new questions about the possible existence of some relationship between the largest network in Mexico and the 18 people detained in Nicaragua in August," Tania Lara wrote in the Periodismo en las Americas blog, published by the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas.

"We have the obligation to clarify the situation of that company [Televisa] and its supposed relations with these people, who continue to insist that they are journalists," said Juárez.

-- End --

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