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Despite Six-Month Investigation, Mexican Authorities Have Not Determined Motive for August 2012 Attack on U.S. Diplomatic Vehicle

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The case involving the attempted murder of two members of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and a Mexican Navy captain in Morelos state last summer remains only partially resolved despite intensive investigations conducted by the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR) during the past six months.

The armored sports utility vehicle came under attack as it traveled on a dirt road to a military installation in Morelos state. Eyewitnesses said the attackers were members of the Mexican federal police (Policía Federal, PF), who opened fire on the SUV with diplomatic plates and gave chase with several of their own vehicles (SourceMex, Sept. 12, 2012). The armored SUV was riddled with bullets, injuring the two US agents.

Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam confirmed that 14 assailants who participated in the attack were taken into custody, but investigators have not been able to determine a motive. "We have conducted an extensive investigation to determine the intention, but we have not been able to find a motive," Murillo told participants at an economic conference in Mexico City in late March.

Attorney general expects ‘severe’ punishment against attackers

In his comments, the attorney general only said authorities have confirmed that the suspects in custody were the ones who attacked the US vehicle. "We have clear evidence of the conduct of the individuals who participated in the attack, and we are anticipating a severe punishment against them," said Murillo. The PF officers who fired on the US vehicle are facing charges of attempted murder.

Murillo also confirmed that Mexican authorities have invited US law-enforcement agencies to share in the results of the investigation. "They have been present in the review of the investigation, and we have reached consensus in reconstructing the events of that day," said the attorney general.

Murillo’s vague comments contrast with reports that the PGR is continuing to investigate five PF commanders accused of ordering 14 officers to lie about the events that led to the shooting of the US vehicle.

The police officers who participated in the incident initially said they were in uniform and marked cars and responded to fire from the SUV. But a PGR’s investigation conducted under former attorney general Marisela Morales Ibáñez revealed that the PF members were wearing civilian clothes, were traveling in unmarked vehicles, and were under orders at all times from their commanding officers.

The PGR investigation revealed that 152 bullets struck the US Embassy’s vehicle and that several police commanders were also under investigation for trying to cover up the officers’ role, in part by ordering them to change into their uniforms before they were interviewed by investigators.
Murillo, who took the helm of the PGR when President Enrique Peña Nieto was inaugurated on Dec. 1, only said that the investigation by his office coincided with the information collected during Morales’ tenure.

The bigger question is whether those commanders answered to an even higher authority. "Commanders controlled by whom? Whose instructions were they following?" one Mexican official with knowledge of the case said in November.

**Suspicion center on criminal organization**

There was initial suspicion that a drug-trafficking organization might have been behind the attack because the PF officers used high-caliber weapons and were not wearing uniforms in the gang-style manner in which they went after the US vehicle. However, the PGR’s November report did not mention any suspects linked to organized crime.

In interviews with the Associated Press in October and again in March, US and Mexican sources suggested that the attack might have been orchestrated by a drug-trafficking organization that operates in an area south of Mexico City. The rural road where the attack occurred is said to be controlled by the Beltrán Leyva cartel. The organization remains strong in México and Michoacán states despite the arrest of one of its top leaders and the death of another in 2010 (SourceMex, Feb. 3, 2010).

But such a blatant attack on US interests is not prudent for organizations that don’t want to attract the attention of US investigators, and at least one analyst believes the order might have come from someone in middle management and not a top cartel leader. "The lower-level leaders in the cartels are making decisions the more seasoned leaders wouldn't," said analyst Andrew Selee of the US-based Mexico Institute. "It's the lower-level leaders who feel empowered to order hits."

One of the other rare attacks on US officials on Mexican soil occurred in February 2011, when a vehicle carrying Jaime Zapata and Víctor Ávila, staff members of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) who were stationed in Mexico City, was ambushed. The attack, thought to be carried out by the Zetas drug organization, killed Zapata and injured Ávila (SourceMex, Feb. 23, 2011). But the person who pulled the trigger said during interrogation that the incident was a case of mistaken identity.

But there are those who feel that the attack in Morelos was targeting the US officials and not a case of mistaken identity. In an interview with the AP, a US official familiar with the investigation said there was ample evidence that the attackers knew the identity of the passengers in the vehicle and specifically targeted them. "This is not a 'Whoops, we got the wrong people [operation],'" the official said.

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