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Mexico Demands Answers from Egypt for Military Attack on Mexican Tourists

by Carlos Navarro

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Foreign Relations Secretary Claudia Ruiz Massieu had only been on the job a few days before she was forced to face the first major test of her brief tenure: dealing with the fallout of an accidental air attack by Egyptian forces on a Mexican tour group visiting the North African country. The Egyptian military attack on Sept. 13 killed 12 people, including eight Mexican citizens and four Egyptians. Four other Mexican tourists were injured. The 12 Mexicans were part of a tour group visiting an area of western Egypt.

The Egyptian government at first said the tourists and their guides wandered into a restricted area where government forces had recently pursued a group of militants loyal to the group known as the Islamic State. The tourists were visiting a part of western Egypt that has long been a popular destination for foreign visitors because of its lush oases, unique sand formations, and white sand dunes.

The government's assertion that the tourists were in an area that was off limits was challenged by the Egyptian union that represents the country's tour guides, which said the proper permits were issued and the Mexican tourists were traveling in vehicles authorized for tours.

The Egyptian government appeared to partially backtrack on its initial assessment. In an open letter to Mexican citizens, published in several Mexican newspapers on Sept. 16, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said the facts of the case remain "confusing," and he promised a thorough and impartial investigation.

"I am writing this open letter to the Mexican people to express my deepest sympathy and condolences for the loss of innocent Mexican lives and the injury of other tourists on Egyptian soil," said Shoukry. "We still do not know if the convoy was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, or if some error was involved."

Ruiz Massieu, who was appointed to replace José Antonio Meade as head of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) just a few weeks earlier ([SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2015](#)), had to take decisive action. The foreign relations secretary immediately traveled to Egypt, where she reiterated a demand that the North African country conduct an exhaustive and transparent investigation to clarify the circumstances behind the attack.

In a communiqué concurrent with Ruiz Massieu's trip to Cairo, the SRE demanded that responsibilities be determined in compliance with "international law."

In Mexico City, deputy foreign relations secretary Carlos de Icaza handed a diplomatic note to Yasser Shaban, Egypt's ambassador in Mexico, demanding full reparations for the victims and their relatives.

In a subsequent television interview, Ruiz Massieu said the Mexican government is considering all legal options to ensure that the Egyptian government provides a full and transparent explanation

for the attack and to guarantee that the four surviving Mexican citizens and the relatives of the eight people who died receive the proper compensation.

Ruiz Massieu said the Mexican government will continue negotiating directly with Egyptian authorities but has not discarded the idea of bringing the matter to an international body. Her comment came in response to a statement from Sen. Gabriela Cuevas, chair of the foreign relations committee (Comisión de Relaciones Exteriores) in the upper house, who said that the Senate would urge the SRE to ask the Organization of American States (OAS) to conduct a full investigation.

"We need to raise our voices as a region, not just as a country," said Cuevas in explaining her request that the matter be brought before the OAS.

Present Enrique Peña Nieto also joined in denouncing the attack. "Mexico condemns these acts against our citizens and has demanded that Egypt conduct an exhaustive investigation of what has occurred," the president said in a statement.

The Egyptian government came under strong criticism in the Mexican media. "A government cannot shoot against a group of people, regardless of circumstances, without having the certainty that the targets are violent criminals," said daily newspaper El Universal said in an editorial.

Similarities between Mexico, Egypt

In his letter of apology, Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry defended his country's actions by comparing the pursuit of militants with Mexico's war against drug traffickers. That statement came under fire in Egypt, with critics saying the comparison was inappropriate.

El Universal, however, noted some similarities between Mexico and Egypt. "This country is a regional powerhouse that is aligned with the US, with significant revenues thanks to its tourist attractions," said the newspaper. "However, there are also serious internal conflicts, and the government lacks the institutional tools to address these problems with efficiency and respect for human rights."

"Here in Mexico we have also been faced with the dilemma of collateral victims of a war," said El Universal, pointing to the government's campaign against organized crime. "This is an unavoidable evil, according to some, because of the need to fight fire with fire. Even so, innocent civilians have been caught in the middle, and the Mexican government must accept its responsibility to provide reparations for the victims."

The British newspaper The Guardian offered an even stronger criticism of the Mexican government, suggesting that the Peña Nieto government was hypocritical.

"The Mexican government has stood by as the country has seen more than 164,000 civilian deaths, 20,000 people go missing and over 70 journalists and media workers killed on its own turf since the drug war's inception in 2006," said The Guardian. "But none of those deaths and disappearances made the protection of Mexican citizens a priority for the president. Apparently, it took the deaths of Mexican tourists in the Wahat region of Egypt's western desert to do that."

"President Peña-Nieto has the gumption to ask the Egyptian government this week 'to perform an exhaustive investigation' looking into the reasons why Egyptian forces air raided and killed twelve tourists, eight of which were Mexican nationals, after allegedly mistaking them for terrorists," added the British newspaper.

Some journalists in Mexico praised the role that Ruiz Massieu and the SRE played in responding so quickly to the tragedy in Egypt but also took the opportunity to criticize the administration overall. "The foreign relations ministry has given us a good example on how to respond to a consular challenge and the need to provide assistance to Mexicans overseas, amid a diplomatic situation that raised tensions with another country," reporter Javier Garza wrote in the online news site Animal Político. "The attention to the victims was timely, and the trip of the foreign relations secretary was appropriate and efficient. She took care not to damage the relations with Egypt at a time of extreme confusion. Yet, she displayed a firm hand."

"The problem is that this type of reaction is unknown for most of us Mexicans. It is not a typical response for the government to respond to a crisis that involves violence and the deaths of Mexicans," added Garza. "The government has tended to hide when violence or death somehow are its responsibility, either by commission or omission. But now the administration is up front when others are responsible for violence and death."

Others wondered why the global community did not express outrage about the attack. "Ten days have elapsed since the attack, and I am surprised that I have not seen a note [of condemnation] from world leaders," columnist Fátima Ibarrola wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio.

"Why don't they like us anymore?" asked Ibarrola. "In other times, international voices would have come out in support of our country and against an Egyptian military dictatorship."

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