

Mexican president deploys troops in wake of oil pipeline bombings

Kevin Kearney, Don Knowland
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In the wake of a coordinated series of oil pipeline bombings on September 10, Mexican President Felipe Calderon ordered the deployment of tens of thousands of army troops throughout the country. This action follows a first year in office in which Calderon, of the National Action Party (PAN), had already militarized Mexico to an extent not seen for over 70 years under the guise of waging a war on violent drug traffickers.

According to Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), the Mexican national oil company, the bombings in the states of Veracruz and Tlaxcala caused a 25 percent drop in the supply of natural gas available to consumers across Mexico; at least 10 states reported natural gas shortages. More than 60 percent of Mexico's steel production was halted and General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, Volkswagen and Honda shut down auto plants for a few days due to lack of natural gas needed to power operations. Damage estimates run in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Ten of thousands of people were also evacuated for a few days from the vicinity of the explosions.

On September 13, a communiqué claiming credit for the bombings, jointly issued by the "Central Committee" of the Popular Revolutionary Democratic Party (PDPR) and the "Military Command" of the Peoples' Revolutionary Army (EPR), was delivered to a Mexican newspaper. According to the statement, which appears on the research web site of the Center for Documentation of Armed Movements www.cedema.org, 12 of the EPR's military units carried out the bombings to force the government to hand over two EPR militants who disappeared on May 25 in Oaxaca state. It said that "the surgical actions on Pemex pipelines are a type of political-military action in self-defense against aggression we have suffered," and that such actions would continue until the two were released alive.

Smaller-scale bombings of Pemex infrastructure on July 5 and 10 in the central Mexican states of Guanajuato and Querétaro are also attributed to the EPR. Those attacks caused the temporary closing of Honda and Nissan factories in three states, but damages were estimated only in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Despite an official statement by Pemex officials after the July 5 explosion that the cause of the explosion was unclear, the Office of the Secretary of National Defense (Sedena) quickly deployed the military to secure the installation.

Less than 24 hours after the July 10 explosion, Sedena and military intelligence claimed the military had received what they deemed to be an authentic communication from the EPR claiming responsibility. Some 18,000 troops were deployed at that time across the nation to secure "strategic installations," including not only Pemex installations, but government offices, malls and areas with a "high demographic concentration."

However, days later, Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora told the newspaper *La Jornada* that, while there were indications that the explosions were intentional, there was not sufficient evidence to implicate the EPR. Specifically, he stated that there were "various lines of

investigation" concerning the incident.

Nonetheless, the next day the military reiterated its confirmation that the attacks on Pemex were attributable to the EPR, adding that it was also investigating supposed coordination between the EPR and the APPO (Popular Assemblies of the People of Oaxaca), as well as "radical elements" in the oil workers union. Sedena then ordered a brigade of infantry organized in three battalions of 1,837 troops to Oaxaca, which lies hundreds of miles to the south of the location of the July attacks on Pemex.

The teachers, students and peasant organizations that make up the demonstrably pacifist APPO immediately denied any connection with the EPR, armed guerilla movements or terrorist plots. The organization pointed out that the military had maintained a "fence" of soldiers around Oaxaca since March 2007, making the involvement of closely monitored APPO members physically improbable. APPO members denounced the attacks as another attempt by widely despised Oaxaca Governor Ulises Ruiz, of the former ruling PRI (Institutional Revolution Party), to blame the teachers' movement and create a fear vote to help his chances in upcoming elections.

In late July, a bomb blew out the front window of the Sears Roebuck of Mexico store in the city of Oaxaca, causing no injuries. Oaxaca police also said they found a bag around the same time containing explosive material inside a branch bank of Citigroup Inc.'s Banamex unit. On July 28, an EPR commando reportedly attacked a prison construction site in the southern state of Chiapas (home of the Zapatista movement), locking up the construction site's custodians, firing shots in the air and painting slogans saying "they took them away alive, we want them back alive" on the walls.

On August 1 the "State" (not "Central") Committee of the PDPR and the "Military Command of the Zone" of the EPR jointly issued a public statement claiming credit for the July Pemex bombings, seemingly confirming the military's attribution of them to the EPR. The statement promised an ongoing campaign against "the oligarchy and the illegitimate government," threatening to hold the nation hostage until the despised PRI governor of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz, and President Calderon freed the two disappeared EPR members.

The EPR was founded near Acapulco in the southern state of Guerrero on June 28, 1996, on the one-year anniversary of the military's massacre of 17 peasants—members of the Peasant Organization of the Southern Sierras. Then the EPR announced the existence of its political arm, the PDPR. The groups at most have a few hundred members.

After its founding in 1996 the EPR launched coordinated attacks on the Pacific beach resort of Huatulco and other towns in Oaxaca and neighboring southern states. It managed to kill a few dozen soldiers and police. In response, government forces raided Zapotec Indian communities near Huatulco, arresting local officials and dozens of others.

In 1997, the EPR engaged in acts of civil disobedience and additional sporadic armed skirmishes with police and soldiers. It largely disappeared

after June 1998, when army troops killed 11 peasants who were attending lectures given by an EPR faction. Some EPR members appeared publicly in Oaxaca last year during the military repression carried out against striking teachers and students. But even as the Mexican Army murdered and disappeared dozens of innocent protesters, the EPR did not initiate acts of violence.

The PDPR-EPR maintain a web site containing many lengthy documents. It describes its strategic line as promoting a “prolonged popular war” in Mexico with the aim of forming a “government of workers and peasants,” which it equates with the dictatorship of the proletariat and “construction of socialism in the conditions of México and with its particularities.” It further states that it aims to reclaim “Marxism-Leninism as the theoretical arm of the exploited peoples.”

Francisco Cerezo is the head of the EPR. According to the Mexican military, Cerezo is really Tiburcio Cruz Sanchez, known as “The Professor,” and comes from a family of guerrillas from Oaxaca state that has been active since the 1970s. His wife allegedly comes from yet another Oaxacan family whose guerrilla activities go back to the 1970s.

Three of Sanchez’s sons were accused of bombing banks in 2001. Two of them remain in jail. Human rights activists claim they are innocent. Members of the Sanchez family deny any involvement at all with the EPR. They accuse the government of inventing charges against the imprisoned brothers and of harassing family members still free.

The EPR communiqués identify the two disappeared EPR members the bombings are designed to free as Edmundo Reyes Amaya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez. The government also says that Cruz Sanchez, who has been in hiding and using aliases for 25 years, is the brother of the EPR’s leader. The military denies it seized the two men. It suggests they were killed in a feud between rebel leaders.

Mexican political circles have been debating for months now whether the EPR has the inclination or means to carry out the Pemex bombings.

Carlos Navarrete, Senate leader of the opposition Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), immediately declared the July attacks on Pemex to be a hoax perpetrated by Calderon in order to create a “smoke screen” to cover up his connections to suspected drug trafficker Zhenli Ye Gon.

In late June, Mexico’s attorney general accused Chinese national Ye Gon of illegally importing 92 tons of pseudoephedrine: a chemical commonly used to produce methamphetamine. When police searched his Mexico City residence, they found \$205 million, 18 million Mexican pesos and €200,000. Ye Gon told authorities that the PAN had given him the money for safe-keeping in 2006. He said Calderon’s current labor secretary, Javier Lozano, told him to “cooperate or we’ll cut your head off.”

Ye Gon evaded Mexican authorities by fleeing to the US, where he was eventually arrested. His attorneys argue that the money was part of a slush fund PAN had amassed in 2006, which had to be hidden once an independent panel was formed to investigate questionable fundraising in the disputed presidential election.

After the July attacks, the journal *Cronica* pointed out that the EPR did not have the economic or technical capacity to carry out such professionally coordinated attacks. A specialist in military studies and national security in Mexico and Latin America, José Luis Piñeyro, told the journal that the EPR lacked the social base necessary to carry out terrorist plots in Guanajuato and Querétaro.

It is in fact widely acknowledged that the EPR in the past limited its activity to the southern, largely agricultural states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas. Those states are several hundred miles from the more industrial states of Guanajuato and Querétaro, which are north of Mexico City. In fact, Guanajuato and Querétaro—both governed by Calderon’s PAN—are not known for any popular social movements, much less guerrilla groups.

The major Mexican *CiDiario* daily opined nationalist movement the EPR would never sabotage the economic infrastructure of the state, saying, “It has never attacked businesses and since 1997, its actions are virtually unknown.”

An article that appeared in Mexico City’s *El Universal* lists several aspects of the attacks that are totally unprecedented in the short history of the EPR, including the fact that the Pemex attacks were not carried out by means of simple, homemade explosive devices, with which the EPR is historically associated, but rather with powerful chemical explosives, implying military expertise. In another article, *El Universal* quoted a high-ranking military official as saying that it would be impossible to gain access on the black market to the explosives used in the attacks.

One might add that if the government in fact seized two well-connected members of the EPR in May, including the brother of the leader of the EPR, that the government thereby obtained access to information about the internal workings of the group. That would provide not only the means to shut down the EPR’s activities, but also to encourage the unprecedented wave of bombings now attributed to it.

In a column in *El Universal* on September 14, Jorge Luis Sierra, a national security consultant, queried, “How can you explain that from one day to the next the EPR reappears with an efficient, coordinated and surprise operation?” “No hypothesis should be discarded,” he concluded. Hypotheses widely circulated so far in Mexico have included that the bombings may be the work of the government, of right-wing groups, of drug traffickers or of US spy agencies.

If, however, the attacks on Pemex are indeed the work of the EPR, they are politically bankrupt and reactionary acts that can only serve to sabotage the struggles of Mexican workers and oppressed peasants. The attacks already have been used as a pretext for expanding and strengthening the military presence throughout the country. They will increasingly be used to criminalize political dissent and organized labor and justify full-scale military assault on both, if need be.

The locus of the attacks has considerable significance. Pemex is the world’s third-largest oil company in terms of crude production, according to Bloomberg. Its Cantarell oilfield is the second largest in the world in terms of production.

Pemex represents the last and most prized vestige of the nationalizations carried out by President Lazaro Cardenas in the late 1930s. In 1935, Mexican oil workers—supported by railroad, electrical and mining unions—struck for better wages. Cardenas oriented himself to popular hostility against foreign oil companies and supported the demands of the workers. On March 18, 1938, he announced the expropriation of 17 foreign oil companies. This act was one of the crowning achievements of Mexico’s bourgeois revolution, solidifying the economic position of its national bourgeoisie while subordinating workers to the government.

By the time Miguel de la Madrid became president (1982-1988), the Mexican government had re-privatized nearly 85 percent of the industries previously acquired, including government-owned banks. Yet Pemex, which currently provides the Mexican government with nearly two thirds of its income, has avoided privatization, primarily due to fear of a popular backlash. But Calderon, former energy secretary under his predecessor, President Vicente Fox, has made the loudest noises thus far in that direction.

The US government in fact backed Calderon in substantial part in the hope that he would open Pemex up to foreign investment. That would provide US-based transnationals with new sources of profit and the US with further strategic control over world energy resources.

Manuel Bartlett Diaz, a PRI senator from 2000 to 2006, and ex-governor of Puebla state, recently told *La Jornada* that he attributed the constant media effort to convince the public of an imminent energy crisis in Mexico to Calderon, the PAN and a substantial section of his own PRI party. He said Calderon began to work on the privatization of Pemex as a

member of the Fox administration, and is willing to intentionally damage the company so as to more easily hand it over to foreign investment.

Thus, the question as to whether Calderon or his government would go so far as to cause hundreds of millions of dollars of damage to oil infrastructure, and raise investor fear of instability, to further that aim is taken seriously in Mexican political circles. Certainly, in response to the attacks, Calderon has already begun establishing military control over Pemex installations nationwide.

The political situation in Mexico is extremely unstable. At least 24 million Mexicans live in misery and millions more continue to work in oppressive conditions just to eek out a living. Calderon took office amidst popular uprisings throughout the country and his own election, suffused with charges of fraud, provoked huge demonstrations in Mexico City. The Mexican ruling elite and its backers in the US government rightfully fear mounting popular anger and desperation.

This is why Calderon has consistently sought any excuse to build up the state's repressive power in the form of domestic military deployments, legal attacks on basic human rights protections, and domestic spying programs, all in close concert with the Bush administration.

An article in *El Universal* sums up the fear-mongering that will be used to justify such measures: "The attacks on Pemex open up ... new risks for national security.... The guerillas may connect with drug traffickers. The drug traffickers would use the guerillas to protect their crops and routes of transit, distract the armed forces and make the extradition of drug traffickers more difficult. While the guerrillas will strengthen themselves with the drug money: they'll have more sophisticated weaponry and will learn to handle explosives. In order to respond to these risks, the government of Felipe Calderon could get tough on subversive groups and begin a low-intensity war against social movements that are presumed to be connected to guerillas ... another option would be to sharpen the intelligence apparatus, detect, infiltrate and deactivate the guerillas."

What is outlined here is the pretext and prescription for a police-military dictatorship in Mexico.



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