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The New York Times

Americans Shot in Mexico Were C.I.A. Operatives Aiding in Drug War

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD and ERIC SCHMITT

8/28/2012

The two Americans who were wounded when gunmen fired on an American Embassy vehicle last week were Central Intelligence Agency employees sent as part of a multiagency effort to bolster Mexican efforts to fight drug traffickers, officials said on Tuesday.

The two operatives, who were hurt on Friday, were participating in a training program that involved the Mexican Navy. They were traveling with a Mexican Navy captain in an embassy sport utility vehicle that had diplomatic license plates, heading toward a military shooting range 35 miles south of the capital when gunmen, some or all of them from the Federal Police, attacked the vehicle, Mexican officials have said.

The Mexican Navy said Tuesday in a statement that an American was driving the vehicle and that during the attack the captain, who was handling logistics and translating for the men, remained in the back seat calling for help on his cellphone.

The men were wounded, the Navy said, when the rain of bullets managed to tear through the car's protective armor. It was unclear if the Americans, who officials said were unarmed, were specifically targeted, if the shooting was a case of mistaken identity or if there was some other reason that the vehicle was ambushed. Mexican prosecutors have detained 12 federal police officers and have said no theory can be ruled out.

The C.I.A. declined to comment. But American officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release information, said no evidence had emerged so far that the Americans were targeted because of their affiliation.

American investigators are working with Mexican authorities to determine what happened and whether the police officers involved were corrupt.

The notion that a squad of federal police officers would attack an embassy car could be another blow to the developing trust and cooperation between American counternarcotics personnel and their Mexican partners.

Through programs like the \$1.6-billion Merida Initiative, the United States has spent millions of dollars on training and equipping the federal police.

Eric Olson, an expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center's Mexico Institute in Washington, said the shooting could only sow some doubts about the police, and at best pointed to a lack of communication among Mexico's military and the police.

"This seems to suggest there isn't better communication between the various elements of the Mexican government," he said. "One fundamental issue is the lack of trust."

In his first public comments on the shooting, President Felipe Calderón, speaking Tuesday at a security forum attended by the American ambassador, Anthony Wayne, promised a thorough investigation.

"Be it from negligence, lack of training, lack of trust, complicity, these acts cannot be permitted and they are being investigated absolutely rigorously," Mr. Calderón said.

The presence of C.I.A. employees, and indeed all American operatives, on Mexican soil has long been a prickly subject here.

In his nearly six years in office, Mr. Calderón has allowed a much larger role for American counternarcotics operations, including the use of unarmed American drones deep in Mexican territory. C.I.A. operatives and retired American military personnel have also worked with American law enforcement agencies and the Mexican military on training and intelligence-gathering. But Mexico has ruled out allowing the Americans to carry out arrests or deploy troops on its soil, and even their limited role has provoked a political outcry over whether the nation's sovereignty has been put in jeopardy.

Lawmakers, instigated by the left, have hauled Mexican government officials before Congress for sometimes testy hearings and after the newspaper La Jornada first reported the C.I.A. involvement on Tuesday, some politicians said they would ask for a thorough explanation of the American role here.

"It's is time to speak clearly and for us to know what institutions are intervening in what specific way in our country in regard to security," said Iris Vianey Mendoza, a senator from the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution.

The office of Enrique Peña-Nieto, who won Mexico's presidential election in July and has promised to maintain close ties with American law enforcement agencies, declined to comment.

The shooting was reminiscent of an attack on American immigration and customs agents last year in which one was fatally shot and another wounded when their embassy sport utility vehicle was ambushed on a highway north of Mexico City. A Mexican man was extradited and is awaiting trial on murder charges in Washington.

This latest episode has caused Mexicans to reflect on the quality of the federal police force, which had achieved growing respect but which has been tarnished by recent corruption scandals.

"The thing that really worries me," said Gabriel Guerra, a political analyst who has worked with the three major parties here, "is that we are seeing the unraveling of what was supposed to be the main achievement in the fight against organized crime, which was the creation of a trustworthy national police."