

Bombers strike gas pipelines

Oil and natural gas pipelines in southeastern Mexico operated by the state oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos, were attacked by bombers.

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WASHINGTON --

Bombers attacked at least six oil and natural gas pipelines in Mexico's southeastern state of Veracruz overnight on Monday, sparking concern that the energy sector of the second largest supplier of oil to the United States may be increasingly vulnerable to attacks from a fledgling Marxist rebel movement.

The bombings, the second such series in as many months, happened at opposite ends of the oil-rich state, suggesting that the assailants had the capability to strike multiple targets at will.

Monday's assaults struck critical shear valves, which control the flow of natural gas, oil or liquefied petroleum gas. Video on Mexican television showed thick black smoke rising above the green tropical lush of the state of Veracruz.

The bombings were symbolically significant because they struck pipelines operated by the state oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), in a state that Mexicans consider synonymous with oil and national sovereignty.

The Notiver news agency in Veracruz reported late Monday that propaganda for the Popular Revolutionary Army was found in an unexploded bomb in the town of La Antigua. The agency said the device was removed by the Mexican army and had this message: "Alive they took them, alive we want them. EPR."

EPR are the Spanish initials for the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario, or Popular Revolutionary Army.

The EPR had taken credit earlier for the unprecedented, sophisticated pipeline bombings on July 5 and July 10 in the Mexican states of Guanajuato and Queretaro, hundreds of miles northeast of Veracruz. Those attacks forced the closure of giant multinational factories run by U.S. and Japanese automakers and companies that make Kellogg's and Hershey's products. The group's prior demands had been for the release of two comrades, Edmundo Reyes Amaya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sánchez, who reportedly disappeared in the poor state of Oaxaca late last year.

Not everyone is certain, however, that the attacks are the EPR's work. "It seems very strange that they only attack Pemex," said Raul Benitez, an expert on Mexican defense and

security issues at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. "They could be paid by some political interest to do this," he said.

Among the groups with a possible interest in damaging Pemex are the oil workers union, which has a checkered past, as well as political opponents of Mexican President Felipe Calderón, analysts said.

Fortunately for American motorists, the Monday bombings, like the July attacks, didn't strike at Mexican oil exports to the United States. Through June, Mexico exported an average of 1.46 million barrels of oil per day to the U.S. market, second only to Canada.

The U.S. government is watching events, however, and "is prepared to offer assistance if asked," said a U.S. government official familiar with Mexico, who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to speak freely on developments.