

With Bombings, Mexican Rebels Escalate Their Fight

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MEXICO CITY, Sept. 25 — The shadowy Marxist rebel group that has rattled [Mexico](#) three times in recent months by bombing natural gas pipelines has a long history of financing its operations with the kidnappings of businessmen, prosecutors say.

Prosecutors say the Ejército Popular Revolucionario, or Popular Revolutionary Army, a Marxist guerrilla group, has committed at least 88 kidnappings since 1999, collecting millions of dollars in ransom.

Just this year, the rebels have taken at least four people hostage, including two prominent businessmen and the relative of a reputed drug dealer, law enforcement officials and anticrime advocates say.

The bombings of gas pipelines are a drastic escalation in the group's tactics. Seemingly overnight, the rebels have evolved from an organization devoted mostly to kidnappings into a much larger threat to the stability of Mexican industry and, by extension, to the state itself, officials say.

“The E.P.R. is a guerrilla organization with a political vision of taking power, and in this sense, has carried out violent acts,” Mexico's attorney general, Eduardo Medina Mora, said last week. He added, “It's a severe worry for the government of Mexico.”

On two days in early July and again on Sept. 10, several bombs went off simultaneously at junctures on the pipelines and disrupted gas supplies to factories and businesses. Together, the attacks shut hundreds of factories in 10 states, some for as long as a week, including Volkswagen, Nissan and Honda plants. Losses have been estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

In all three attacks, the bombers filled fire extinguishers with a mixture of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil, then detonated them with plastic explosives wired to digital watches and batteries.

The power of the bombs and the logistical skill in setting them off at the same time took many top officials here by surprise. Before the blasts, the Popular Revolutionary Army was considered a moribund group that had peaked in 1996 and then splintered into several smaller groups.

After each bombing, the group issued communiqués demanding the return of two of its members. The group maintained that the men — Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sánchez and Edmundo Reyes Amaya — disappeared last May in Oaxaca, a state that has a long history

of peasant insurgencies and brutal government repression. Mr. Medina Mora and Oaxacan officials insist that the men are not in government custody.

Mexican law enforcement officials say the guerrillas are using the men's disappearance as a pretext to destabilize Mexico and set off a leftist revolution. The bombings, they theorize, probably stem from anger among radical leftists over the federal crackdown on violent political protests in Oaxaca last year and the outcome of the presidential election, in which the leftist candidate narrowly lost.

The Popular Revolutionary Army has deep roots in Oaxaca, having been founded there in 1994 when 14 small insurgent groups banded together. The core leadership came from an extremist Marxist organization known by the acronym Procup, the Spanish initials for the Clandestine Revolutionary Workers' Party-Union of the People.

Founded in the 1970s, Procup waged a campaign of kidnappings and executions against other leftists in the 1980s.

The Popular Revolutionary Army made its presence known in June 1996. At an event in Guerrero State commemorating the first anniversary of a massacre by the state police, masked guerrillas in the group read a manifesto calling for a socialist revolution. Many leftist politicians believed at first that they were government provocateurs.

But two months later, the group mounted coordinated attacks on police and military posts in five states, killing 13 people. Small columns of rebels continued to ambush police convoys and skirmish with soldiers for the next two years.

By late 1998, the military, the federal police and the Oaxacan authorities had made strides in dismantling the group, arresting several leaders and scores of people suspected of being tied to it, mostly from Oaxaca.

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By JAMES C. McKINLEY Jr. and ANTONIO BETANCOURT
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The group splintered into several factions after a shootout with the army in 1998 in El Charco, Guerrero. While the splinter groups continued to carry out bombings, the Popular Revolutionary Army seemed to slip into the background.

"They have been really quiet for the past several years," said Bill Weinberg, a New York author who has written a book on Mexican insurgencies, "Homage to Chiapas." "A lot of us thought they were finished."

Law enforcement officials here say the group has only been underground, not dead. Its fortunes revived in late 2000 after the governor of Oaxaca, José Murat, granted amnesty to

about 135 people suspected of being members who were being held in state prisons, officials say.

Today, officials say the rebels' main base of operations is not in the mountains of southern Mexico, but in the teeming slums of Xochimilco and Tláhuac in Mexico City. Active members are believed to number no more than 100, officials say.

Mexican law enforcement officials say the leadership of the group includes figures like Tiburcio Cruz Sánchez, a Oaxacan whose involvement goes back to the 1970s when he was a member of Procup. "Most of the leadership is Oaxacan," said a law enforcement official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about a continuing investigation.

Felipe Canseco, a former Procup member who is now a lawyer, said the Popular Revolutionary Army is organized in underground cells, so that the members do not know the names of the upper echelon of commanders. "These groups are very clandestine and compartmentalized," he said. "The E.P.R. does not recognize a chief."

Mr. Canseco said he worried that the government would use the bombings as an excuse to harass peaceful left-wing organizations, like his group, the Democratic Popular Left, a collection of former guerrillas trying to participate as a political party.

"These bombings make it clear that after 40 years the military insurgents continue to exist and that they have become strong," he said. "More than anything else, this gives the government a motive to start up the dirty war again."