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Pipeline attacks still not solved

By Kevin G. Hall and Pablo Bachelet
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WASHINGTON -- When saboteurs blew up several natural gas pipelines in central Mexico this month, temporarily shutting down production for U.S. automakers and other important manufacturers, a small and shadowy Marxist guerrilla group called the Popular Revolutionary Army reportedly claimed responsibility.

Four explosions in the Bajío, a central region that's the stronghold of the ruling conservative National Action Party and a major manufacturing zone, disrupted the flow of natural gas between Mexico City and Guadalajara, the country's two biggest cities, and paralyzed pipelines in Veracruz and Guanajuato states.

General Motors and Nissan are said to have lost millions of dollars in production at their plants in the region.

But as the investigation into the bombings July 5 and July 10 drags on, the mystery only grows.

Theories abound

Among the theories: The bombings were the work of drug cartels striking back at a federal government crackdown, or they were financed by Venezuela's revolution-minded leftist president, Hugo Chavez.

Chavez has made no secret of his disdain for Mexico's conservative president, Felipe Calderon, who during a controversial campaign used Chavez's image to scare voters away from leftist rival Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. But intelligence officials in the United States and Mexico say they have no evidence that Chavez is bankrolling the extreme left in Mexico.

Others suspect that it could be the work of the radical wing of the leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD, whose candidate, Lopez Obrador, was a bitter loser last year. The oil workers union he helped lead in Mexico's oil-rich south was known to set wells on fire when pressing demands with the state oil company Petroleos Mexicanos.

But PRD has criticized the Mexican government for withholding information that the explosions were caused by sabotage.

Mexico's guerrilla movements historically have been small and generally a political nuisance, so pipeline attacks are highly unusual.

"This could be an isolated event, or it could be the start of a campaign. We just don't know," said Raul Benitez, a professor at Mexico's National Autonomous University who has studied the nation's armed guerrilla movements.

The Mexican government hasn't officially blamed the Popular Revolutionary Army, or EPR, although major Mexican newspapers reported that the group has claimed responsibility and demanded the return of two colleagues imprisoned or missing in the southern state of Oaxaca.

The EPR's historical base of operations is hundreds of miles away in the impoverished state of Guerrero. Authorities say the bombers used sophisticated European-style plastic explosives, which the EPR has never used before.

Major oil exporter

Ordinary Americans should have an interest. Mexico is the second-largest exporter of crude oil to the United States -- more than 1.4 million barrels per day as of April -- and if unknown assailants can blow up a natural gas pipeline, they can strike as easily at oil. World oil prices are above \$75 a barrel, and further strikes against the Mexican energy infrastructure would add to the price jitters.

Mexico is a dangerously soft target because it has more than 17,000 miles of oil pipelines and 8,235 miles of natural gas pipelines to protect. A McClatchy Newspapers investigation in March demonstrated that Mexico's oil installations can be accessed without authorization.

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