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From the Los Angeles Times

Budget rapped in probe of Mexico blasts

Funding losses have crippled the intelligence agency's efforts to battle leftist guerrillas destroying pipelines, a Cabinet official says.

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MEXICO CITY — Interior Minister Francisco Ramirez Acuña told a congressional hearing Tuesday that a series of sharp cutbacks at Mexico's top intelligence service has hindered authorities in their efforts against a leftist guerrilla group that has been bombing oil pipelines.

At a sometimes raucous hearing before the lower house of Congress, Ramirez Acuña also heard some legislators call on President Felipe Calderon's government to open negotiations with the guerrillas, known as the Popular Revolutionary Army, or EPR in Spanish.

Ramirez Acuña said the Calderon government would not negotiate with the group, which analysts believe may have fewer than 100 members. The interior minister called the bombings, which struck 10 pipelines belonging to the national oil company Pemex and forced the closure of dozens of factories in July and this month, a "cowardly act." The government will work to apprehend the group's members, he said. "The state will have to react with all its force," Ramirez Acuña said. "We can't allow these groups to try and destabilize the country."

The interior minister said that reduced funding for the Center for Research on National Security had compromised the agency's mission. The agency, a sort of amalgam of the United States' National Security Agency and FBI, reduced staffing by more than 1,000 employees in recent years, Ramirez Acuña said. It has also cut back funding for surveillance equipment.

"We inherited an agency that with the passage of time had deteriorated," Ramirez Acuña said. "It was not in the condition to deal with these types of attacks."

Public records show that President Vicente Fox's administration reduced the agency's budget during his final three years in office. Calderon, who succeeded Fox last year, also reduced the agency's budget before requesting an increase for the coming year.

Without offering specifics, the interior minister said the intelligence agency "lacked the state-of-the-art technology to anticipate the actions of these groups."

The agency, which is within the Interior Ministry, is responsible for gathering domestic intelligence and assessing threats to national security. Founded in 1989, it is the lead agency in the fight against several underground leftist groups.

The agency's budget rose and fell during the Fox administration, records show. In 2006, it had 2,800 staff members, including 1,500 national security agents, according to public records published Tuesday by the newspaper El Universal.

As Ramirez Acuña spoke, legislators with the leftist Democratic Revolution Party, or PRD, held banners in Congress branding him a liar and calling on the Calderon government to "stop the militarization of the country."

PRD legislator Valentina Batres Guadarrama called on Ramirez Acuña to resign and gave voice to a popular conspiracy theory here: Government agents, not leftist guerrillas, blew up the Pemex lines.

"Is the EPR responsible for these explosions?" Batres Guadarrama asked rhetorically. "Or are you so perverse as to make up these attacks, in order to provoke fear and cause the technical breakdown of Pemex so that it can be sold or privatized?"

In a series of communiqués, the guerrilla group has said it would continue its bombing campaign until the government releases two militants detained this year in the state of Oaxaca. Ramirez Acuña said the government does not have the men.

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