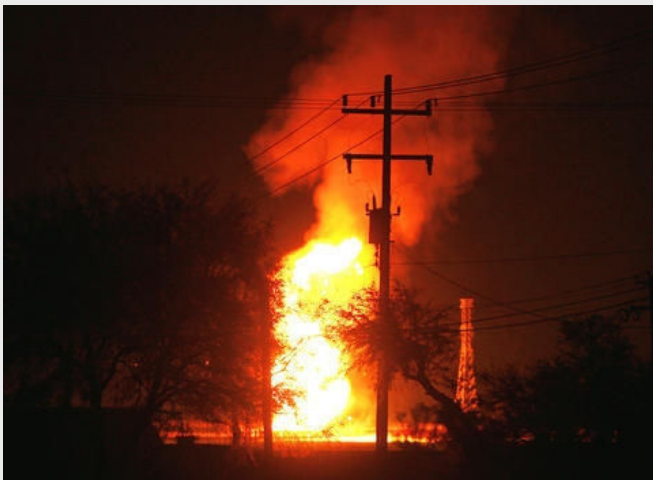




sabotage & terrorism

The Popular Revolutionary Army – A threat to Mexico's energy infrastructure

On 10 September 2007, 12 explosive devices were planted at strategic points along the pipeline infrastructure of the state energy company Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex) in Mexico's eastern provinces of Veracruz and Tlaxcala. Six of the devices exploded almost simultaneously, with devastating effect. Although no casualties were reported, the blasts cut Mexico's gas flow by a quarter, disrupting supply to approximately 1.3 million people in ten states. Two major highways were closed and the authorities had to evacuate some 21,000 people from their homes. In addition, 2,500 companies, including several multinationals such as Volkswagen, General Motors, Ford, Honda,



Nissan, Chrysler, Vitro and Grupo Modelo SA, were badly affected. In total, the cost to business from the attacks was estimated at more than US\$200 million and international oil prices surged to record levels. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the self-styled Marxist guerrilla group the Popular Revolutionary Army (Ejercito Popular Revolucionario: EPR). It was their third such attack in three months. On 5 July, the group blew up gas pipelines near the municipalities of Celaya and Salamanca in Guanajuato state. Five days later, a second round of bombs disabled a network of natural and liquefied gas pipelines serving the heavily industrialised region of El Bajío, which encompasses parts of Queretaro, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes and Jalisco states. The attacks demonstrate the emergence of a new and capable left-wing guerrilla threat in Mexico and the vulnerability of the country's thousands of kilometres of oil and gas pipelines, a weakness which, if successfully exploited, will have significant implications for foreign companies operating in the country.



The Popular Revolutionary Army

The EPR has its roots in Oaxaca state, having been founded there in 1994 when 14 small, predominantly Marxist-Leninist organisations, including the Partido de los Pobres (PDLP) and the Partido Revolucionario Obcero Clandestine Union del Pueblo (PROCUP), banded together. Seeking the establishment of a revolutionary Marxist government in Mexico, the EPR rose to prominence in 1996 when it launched a series of ambushes on police and army convoys that took the lives of 26 soldiers and police officers. However, internal divisions and a robust counter-offensive by Mexican security forces was thought to have significantly weakened the organisation and, limited to carrying out mainly criminal acts such as bank robbery and kidnapping, the EPR gradually disappeared from the public consciousness as the 1990s drew to a close.

The group's robust re-emergence has taken many by surprise. Although it briefly resurfaced last year, playing a central role in the civil unrest that shook Oaxaca state and conducting several bank bombings in Mexico City, the pipeline bombings represent a significant tactical departure and a major escalation for the group. The EPR has traditionally attacked symbolic targets such



Comandancia del Ejército Popular Revolucionario Rompió el Aislamiento. (A)

as the security forces, banks and government offices using small, crudely-made Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and through small, low-key guerrilla ambushes. It has also usually struck at targets within its heartland, namely the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Now it appears to be attacking targets with more of a strategic or economic value. It is attacking these targets hundreds of kilometres from its usual operating theatre and is using multiple, coordinated, powerful, and relatively sophisticated IEDs to precisely hit shear valves that control the flow of oil and gas through the pipelines. . This activity suggests that the EPR has far greater technical, logistical and organisational ability than previously thought. It also suggests the presence of an experienced and competent bomb-maker and of somebody with significant technical knowledge of energy infrastructure.

Demands

After the bombings in July and September,



the EPR issued communiqués stating that they were fighting a war 'against the interests of the oligarchy and this illegitimate government' and said that the attacks would continue until Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Governor Ulises Ruiz of Oaxaca state release of Edmundo Reyes Maya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez, two leaders of the EPR's political wing, the Popular Revolutionary Democratic Party (Partido Democrático Popular Revolucionario: PDPR). The EPR states that the two men were detained by the army in Oaxaca last May and taken to a military installation before disappearing. However, the Mexican government has consistently said it has no knowledge of the whereabouts of the two men and the attorney general's office has no record of their detention. The Mexican authorities have also stated that they believe that the pair may have fallen victim to a dispute within the group and that the EPR are using the men's disappearance as a justification for their costly and destabilising attacks.

Response

Following the July pipeline attacks, President Calderon authorised the deployment of 5,000 special troops to secure the pipelines, as well



as dams and power plants. Regular ground and air patrols were also stepped up. However, as the September attack demonstrates, Mexico's energy infrastructure, with 27,000km of oil pipeline and 13,400km of natural gas pipeline, remains a dangerously soft target. Identifying, disrupting and dismantling the EPR is also proving to be extremely difficult. Although active members are thought only to number in the low hundreds, the organisation has no recognisable leadership as such and is particularly clandestine and compartmentalised. It has also benefited from widespread discontent over the federal crackdown on the violent protests in Oaxaca last year and the outcome of the presidential election, in which the left-wing candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador narrowly lost, by diversifying its base of operations away from its traditional heartland in the mountains of southern Mexico into the teeming slums of Xochimilco and Tlahuac in Mexico City. Compounding the problem in tackling the EPR is the fact that Mexico's security forces

are currently over-stretched by the so-called 'frontal war' against the country's major drug cartels. The campaign against these criminal organisations has already cost some 1,300 lives this year and has severely drained the resources of the security forces. Francisco Ramurez Acuna, the Mexican Interior Minister, has already admitted that Mexico does not currently have the intelligence capacity to forestall further guerrilla attacks and it is difficult to see a significant improvement in their capabilities in the short-to-medium term.

Forecast

With the Mexican government continuing to deny the detention of Edmundo Reyes Maya and Gabriel Alberto Cruz Sanchez and the EPR promising to continue to attack 'strategic installations' until they are released, further attacks on Mexico's energy infrastructure are highly likely in the coming weeks and months. Given the capabilities and resources that the EPR have recently demonstrated and the fact that the Mexican energy pipeline network is impossible to guard adequately, there is a high risk that these attacks will once again be successful. There is also a chance that the EPR's operational tempo, already comparatively high, will increase further. The group will have been emboldened by the

success of the July and September attacks and will sense further opportunities with the Mexican security apparatus distracted by the offensive on the cartels. If its operational tempo does increase, we may also see a corresponding escalation in the group's criminal activities, which include kidnapping and bank robbery, in a bid to generate the revenue required to maintain these bombing operations. In short, Mexico's already tense security environment looks set to deteriorate further and companies and personnel operating in country are advised to review their business continuity plans and security arrangements.

Lee Niblett, Senior Analyst at red24 assesses the threat to Mexican natural gas from Mexican rebels. For more information on the support available for clients operating in the region, please contact customerenquiry@red24.info

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