

By Scott Stewart

At approximately 2 a.m. on Sept. 25, a small improvised explosive device (IED) consisting of three or four butane canisters was used to attack a Banamex bank branch in the Milpa Alta delegation of Mexico City. The device damaged an ATM and shattered the bank's front windows. It was not an isolated event. The bombing was the seventh recorded IED attack in the Federal District — and the fifth such attack against a local bank branch — since the beginning of September.

The attack was claimed in a communique posted to a Spanish-language anarchist Web site by a group calling itself the Subversive Alliance for the Liberation of the Earth, Animals and Humans (ASLTAH). The note said, "Once again we have proven who our enemies are," indicating that the organization's "cells for the dissolution of civilization" were behind the other, similar attacks. The communique noted that the organization had attacked Banamex because it was a "business that promotes torture, destruction and slavery" and vowed that ASLTAH would not stop attacking "until we see your ashes." The group closed its communique by sending greetings to the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and the "eco-pyromaniacs for the liberation of the earth in this place." Communiques have also claimed some of the other recent IED attacks in the name of ASLTAH.

On Sept. 22, authorities also discovered and disabled a small IED left outside of a MetLife insurance office in Guadalajara, Jalisco state. A message spray-painted on a wall near where the device was found read, "Novartis stop torturing animals," a reference to the multinational pharmaceutical company, which has an office near where the IED was found and which has been heavily targeted by the group Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). Novartis is a large customer of Huntingdon Life Sciences, the research company SHAC was formed to destroy because Huntingdon uses animals in its testing for harmful side effects of drugs, chemicals and consumer items. A second message spray-painted on a wall near where the device was found on Sept. 22 read, "Novartis break with HLS." Two other IEDs were detonated at banks in Mexico City on the same day.

These IED attacks are the most recent incidents in a wave of anarchist, animal rights, and eco-protest attacks that have swept across Mexico this year. Activists have conducted literally hundreds of incidents of vandalism, arson and, in more recent months, IED attacks in various locations across the country. The most active cells are in Mexico City and Guadalajara.

For a country in the midst of a bloody cartel war in which thousands of people are killed every year — and where serious crimes like kidnapping terrorize nearly every segment of society — direct-action attacks by militant activists are hardly the biggest threat faced by the Mexican government. However, the escalation of direct-action attacks in Mexico that has resulted in the more frequent use of IEDs shows no sign of abating, and these attacks are likely to grow more

frequent, spectacular and deadly.

The Wave

Precisely quantifying the wave of direct-action attacks in Mexico is difficult for a number of reasons. One is that the reporting of such incidents is spotty and the police, the press and the activists themselves are often not consistent in what they report and how. Moreover, it is often hard to separate direct-action vandalism from incidents of plain old non-political vandalism or tell the difference between an anarchist IED attack against a bank and an IED attack against a bank conducted by a Marxist group such as the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR). Then there is the issue of counting. Should a series of five Molotov cocktail attacks against ATMs or the destruction of 20 Telmex phone booths in one night be counted as one attack or as separate incidents?

If we count conservatively — e.g., consider a series of like incidents as one — we can say there have been around 200 direct-action attacks to date in 2009. But if we count each incident separately, we can easily claim there have been more than 400 such attacks. For example, by our count, there have been more than 350 Telmex phone booths smashed, burned or otherwise vandalized so far this year. (Activists will do things like glue metal shavings into the calling-card and coin slots.) However, for the sake of this analysis we'll go with the conservative number of about 200 attacks.

Now, Telmex seems to be the most popular target so far for direct-action attacks. In addition to hitting phone booths, activists also have attacked Telmex vehicles and offices and have cut Telmex cables. From their statements, the activists appear to hold a special hatred for Carlos Slim, one of the richest men in the world and the chairman of Telmex and several other companies. In many ways, Slim — a patriarchal billionaire industrialist — is the personification of almost everything that the anarchistic activists hate. In addition to Telmex and banks, the activists also have attacked other targets such as restaurants (including McDonald's and KFC), meat shops, pet shops, fur and leather stores, luxury vehicles, and construction equipment.

The activists' most common tactics tend to be on the lower end of the violence scale and include graffiti and paint (frequently red to symbolize the blood of animals) to vandalize a target. They also frequently release captive birds or animals as well as use superglue and pieces of metal to obstruct locks, pay phones and ATM card readers. Moving up the violence continuum, activists less frequently will break windows, burn buildings and vehicles, and make bomb threats — there have been at least 157 incidents involving arson or incendiary devices so far in 2009. To help put this into perspective, these activists have conducted more arson attacks in Mexico to date in 2009 than their American counterparts have conducted in the United States since 2001.

At the high end of the violence spectrum are the IED attacks, and this is where there has really been an increase in activity in recent weeks. In the first six months of 2009, there were several bomb threats and hoaxes and a few acid bombs, but only two real IEDs were used. In June, July and August there was one IED attack per month — and so far in September there have been seven IED attacks in Mexico City alone and one successful attack and one attempted

attack in Guadalajara. Again, by way of comparison, these eight IED attacks by Mexican activists in September are more than American activists have conducted in the United States since 2001.

Proliferation of IEDs

There are several factors that can explain this trend toward the activists' increasing use of IEDs. The first is, quite simply, that IEDs generate more attention than graffiti, glue or even an arson attack — indeed, here we are devoting a weekly security report to activist IED attacks in Mexico. In light of the overall level of violence in Mexico, most observers have ignored the past lower-level activity by these activist groups, and IEDs help cut through the noise and bring attention to the activists' causes. The scope and frequency of IED attacks this month ensured that they could not be overlooked.

The second factor is the learning curve of the cells' bombmakers. As a bombmaker becomes more proficient in his tradecraft, the devices he crafts tend to become both more reliable and more powerful. The improvement in tradecraft also means that the bombmaker is able to increase his operational tempo and deploy devices more frequently. It is quite possible that the few IEDs that were reported as hoaxes in March, April and May could have been IEDs that did not function properly — a common occurrence for new bombmakers who do not extensively test their devices.

The third factor is thrill and ego. In many past cases, militant activists have launched progressively larger attacks. One reason for this is that after a series of direct-action attacks, the activists get bored doing lower-level things like gluing locks or paint-stripping cars and they move to more destructive and spectacular attacks, such as those using timed incendiary devices. For many activists, there is a thrill associated with getting increased attention for the cause, in causing more damage to their targets and in getting away with increasingly brazen attacks.

Finally, in recent years, we have noted a shift among activist groups away from a strict concern for human life. Many activists are becoming convinced that less violent tactics have been ineffective, and if they really want to save the Earth and animals, they need to take more aggressive action. There is a small but growing fringe of hard-core activists who believe that, to paraphrase Lenin, you have to break eggs to make an omelet.

The Ruckus Society, a direct-action activist training organization, explains it this way in a training document: "There is a law against breaking into a house. However, if you break into a house as part of a greater good, such as rushing into the house to save a child from a fire, it is permissible to break that law. In fact, you can say that there is even a moral obligation to break that law. In the same way then, it is permissible to break minor laws to save the Earth." In general, activists do not condone violent action directed at humans, but neither do they always condemn it in very strong terms — they often explain that the anger that prompts such violence is "understandable" in light of what they perceive as ecological injustice and cruelty to animals.

In recent years there has been a polarization in the animal rights and environmental

movements, with fringe activists becoming increasingly isolated and violent — and more likely to use potentially deadly tools like IEDs in their attacks.

Confluences

The very name of ASLTAH — the Subversive Alliance for the Liberation of the Earth, Animals and Humans — illustrates the interesting confluence of animal rights, ecological activism and anti-imperialism/anarchism that inhabit the radical fringe. It is not uncommon for one cell of independent activists to claim it carried out its attacks under the banner of "organizations" such as ELF, ALF or SHAC. In true anarchistic style, however, these organizations are amorphous and nonhierarchical — there is no single ELF, ALF or SHAC. Rather, the individual activists and cells who act on behalf of the organizations control their own activities while adhering to guidelines circulated in meetings and conferences, via the Internet, and in various magazines, newsletters and other publications. These individual activists and cells are driven only by their consciences, or by group decisions within the cell. This results in a level of operational security that can be hard for law enforcement and security officials to breach.

As noted above, these activists have been far more active in Mexico than they have in the United States. One reason for this is that the operating environment north of the border is markedly different than it is in Mexico. In the United States, the FBI and local and state police agencies have focused hard on these activists, and groups like ELF and ALF have been branded as domestic terrorists. There have been several major investigations into these groups in recent years.

South of the border it is a different matter. Mexican authorities are plagued with problems ranging from drug cartels to Marxist terrorist/insurgent groups like the EPR to rampant police and government corruption. Simply put, there is a vacuum of law and order in Mexico and that vacuum is clearly reflected in statistics such as the number of kidnappings inside the country every year. The overall level of violence in Mexico and this vacuum of authority provide room for the activists to operate, and the host of other crime and violence issues plaguing the country works to ensure that the authorities are simply too busy to place much emphasis on investigating activist attacks and catching those responsible for them. Therefore, the activists operate boldly and with a sense of impunity that often leads to an increase in violence — especially within the context of a very violent place, which Mexico is at the present time.

This atmosphere means that the activist cells behind the increase in IED attacks will be able to continue their campaigns against assorted capitalist, animal and ecological targets with very little chance of being seriously pursued. Consequently, as the IED campaign continues, the attacks will likely become more frequent and more destructive. And given Mexico's densely populated cities and the activists' target sets, this escalation will ensure that the attacks will eventually turn deadly.

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