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ACTION ARA-20

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FM AMEMBASSY MEXICO
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 729
INFO DIA WASHDC

MEXICO 7696

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS MX
SUBJECT: FIGUEROA KIDNAPPING

ARA/MEX - PLEASE PASS TO AMBASSADOR JOVA

1. LESS THAN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS AFTER NEWS OF RELEASE OF JOSE GUADALUPE ZUNO, MEXICO WAS ROCKED BY HEADLINES THAT THE MEXICAN ARMY HAD RESCUED SENATOR FIGUEROA SAFE AND SOUND IN SHOOTOUT WITH A PORTION OF LUCIO CABANAS GUERRILLA GROUP. ACCORDING TO SECRETARY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE, CUENCA DIAZ, WHO HAD BEEN IN ACAPULCO AT TIMES OF RESCUE, THE SHOOTOUT OCCURRED 0930 SEPT 8 IN AREA SOUTHEAST OF VILLAGE ATOYAC DE ALVAREZ, GUERRERO. ARMY SUFFERED ONLY MINOR WOUND TO ONE SOLDIER WHILE INFLECTING HEAVY CASUALTIES (NUMBER UNSPECIFIED) ON THE GUERRILLA GROUP. FIGUEROA'S NEPHEW, SECRETARY, AND TWO OTHER AIDES WERE ALSO RESCUED ALTHOUGH TWO HAD SUPERFICIAL WOUNDS. ACCORDING TO CUENCA DIAZ, CABANAS WAS NOT WITH THE GROUP, OR IF HE WAS, ESCAPED. CUENCA CONCLUDED HIS SHORT STATEMENT BY SAYING ARMY HAD PERFORMED ITS MISSION OF RESCUING FIGUEROA, AND PLEDGED

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TO CONTINUE ITS PURSUIT OF CABANAS AND HIS "GANG OF THUGS".

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: SAM A. MOSKOWITZ

DATE/CASE ID: 29 JAN 1999 199800894

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FIGUEROA WAS FLOWN IMMEDIATELY TO ACAPULCO AND FROM THERE TO MEXICO CITY MILITARY HOSPITAL FOR A THOROUGH MEDICAL EXAMINATION. HE REPORTEDLY HAD LOST BETWEEN 33-44 POUNDS BUT OTHERWISE WAS IN REASONABLY GOOD HEALTH. CUENCA DIAZ SAID FIGUEROA WOULD ANSWER REPORTERS' QUESTIONS WITHIN NEAR FUTURE, BUT FAMILY MEMBERS SAID SEPT 9 THAT FIGUEROA WOULD ANSWER QUESTIONS PUBLICLY WHEN PRESIDENT ECHEVERRIA AUTHORIZED IT. LATE ON SEPT 9 FIGUEROA RETURNED TO HIS HOME, DODGING REPORTERS. LATER HIS SON SAID THE SENATOR WOULD HOLD A PRESS CONFERENCE ON SEPT 12. REPORTERS HAVE NOT HAD A CHANCE THUS FAR TO INTERVIEW ANY OF THOSE RESCUED WITH FIGUEROA.

3. FIGUEROA'S SON, LIC. RUBEN FIGUEROA ALCOCER, ACKNOWLEDGED TO REPORTERS THAT SHORTLY BEFORE THE SENATOR'S RESCUE, AGREEMENT HAD BEEN REACHED BETWEEN FAMILY AND CABANAS GROUP FOR PAYMENT OF 50 OR 100 MILLION PESO RANSOM. HE CLAIMED, HOWEVER, THAT THE ARMY HAD SECURED FIGUEROA'S RELEASE BEFORE THE TRANSACTION WAS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE AND THAT NOT A CENTAVO WAS PAID. FAMILY SOURCES WERE ALSO QUOTED AS SAYING THAT WHEN FIGUEROA WAS RESCUED, HE WAS "ACCOMPANIED BY A NUMBER OF CAMPEBINOS".

4. ACCORDING TO ONE SOURCE (RELIABILITY NOT TESTED) AVAILABLE TO THE EMBASSY, THE TRUCKERS UNION WHICH FIGUEROA HEADED DID PAY A 25 MILLION PESO RANSOM, AND AGREED TO PAY A SECOND RANSOM AFTER HIS RELEASE.

5. COMMENT: LIKE THE ZUNO CASE, THE OFFICIAL VERSION OF FIGUEROA'S LIBERATION PLACES A HEAVY BURDEN OF CREDULITY UPON OBSERVERS. AMONG THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND QUESTIONABLE "FACTS", THUS FAR, ARE THE FOLLOWING:

A. FIGUEROA WAS RESCUED UNHARMED IN A SHOOT-OUT, THOUGH SOME OF HIS AIDES WERE REPORTEDLY SLIGHTLY WOUNDED;

B. FIGUEROA'S RESCUE WAS EFFECTED AT A TIME WHEN ARMY AND OTHER PUBLIC AUTHORITIES HAD THEIR PRIMARY

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ATTENTION -- AND RESOURCES -- FOCUSED ON THE ZUNO CASE. ARMY, WHICH HAD NOT LOOKED TOO GOOD IN EFFORTS THUS FAR, WAS SUDDENLY SUCCESSFUL.

C. MILITARY CASUALTIES (SEE ABOVE) WERE VIRTUALLY NIL.

D. CABANAS WAS NOT CAPTURED.

E. FIGUEROA WAS SIGHTED IN COMPANY OF "PEASANTS" NOT FURTHER IDENTIFIED: WERE THEY KIDNAPPERS?

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AUTHORITIES, WITH OR WITHOUT FIGUEROA'S AGREEMENT, SEEM CLEARLY TO BE SHIELDING HIM AND HIS RESCUED AIDES FROM THE PRESS. WHY?

G. THE UNSUBSTANTIATED REPORT MENTIONED IN PARA 4 ABOVE RAISES THE POSSIBILITY THAT FIGUEROA WAS, UNDER THE TERMS OF SOME UNDISCLOSED RELEASE AGREEMENT, READY FOR "DELIVERY" BEFORE THE SHOOT-OUT OCCURRED.

6. WHAT EVER THE TRUTH OF THE FIGUEROA RESCUE -- AND SOME MEXICAN OBSERVERS, SUCH AS EXCELSIOR, ARE PRESSING FOR EXPLANATIONS -- IT IS CLEAR THAT GOM AND ECHEVERRIA ON THE BASIS OF OFFICIAL ACCOUNTS THUS FAR PROFIT HEAVILY FROM THE OUTCOME OF THE FIGUEROA AND ZUNO CASES. THE GOVERNMENT APPEARS TO HAVE HELD FIRM IN ITS POSITION OF NOT DEALING WITH TERRORISTS, THE VICTIMS ARE SAFELY AT HOME, AND THE MEXICAN MILITARY COMES UP SMELLING OF ROSES. THIS IS ALMOST TOO MUCH OF A HAPPY ENDING AND THE EMBASSY HAS DOUBTS WHICH SEEM TO BE SHARED BY MEXICAN OBSERVERS.

7. DATT COMMENT: THE ARMY IN FACT, AT THE MOMENT SEEMS TO BE PROFITING MOST FROM FIGUEROA'S RELEASE. SUCH EDITORIAL COMMENTS AS "HONOR TO THE ARMY OF THE REVOLUCION"; "THOSE WHO TRANSGRESS ESTABLISHED ORDER KNOW WELL THEY WILL CONTEND WITH THE GUAREIAN OF THE (SIC) INSTITUTIONS, THE ARMY" ARE ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE PUBLIC REACTION. MOREOVER, DAO BELIEVES THERE WERE MORE CASUALTIES ON BOTH SIDES THAN PUBLISHED. SUPPOSEDLY, UP TO SIX GUERRILLAS HAVE BEEN KILLED, INCLUDING LUCIA CABANAS'

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COUSIN, LUIS CABANOS. IN SUM, THE ARMY'S REPUTATION HAS SUDDENLY BEEN REDEEMED AND IS BEING WIDELY LAUDED.
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*** Current Classification ***

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