

'You weren't paranoid': Mexico at heart of spyware scandal

20 July 2021, by Natalia Cano and Alexander Martinez



Israeli firm NSO insists its software is only intended for use in fighting terrorism and other crimes.

Journalist Marcela Turati always suspected the Mexican authorities were spying on her. Now she's almost certain, after appearing in a leaked list at the center of a global spyware scandal.

"People have written to me saying: 'Look, you weren't crazy, you weren't paranoid,'" she told AFP on Monday.

Some 15,000 Mexican smartphone numbers were among more than 50,000 believed to have been selected by clients of Israeli firm NSO Group for potential surveillance, according to an international media investigation.

They include numbers linked to 25 journalists and even President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's inner circle before he took office.

Although the Mexican license for Pegasus software acquired under former president Enrique Pena Nieto expired in 2017, Turati believes that monitoring continues in other ways.

"Almost all journalists in Mexico know and feel that we are under some kind of surveillance," the award-winning reporter said.

"It's something that is assumed, especially because Mexico is among the most dangerous countries to practice the profession," the 47-year-old said.

The revelations emerged over the weekend as part of a collaborative investigation by The Washington Post, The Guardian, Le Monde, Mexico's Aristegui Noticias and other media outlets.

One of the Mexican journalists on the list was murdered in 2017 after criticizing alleged links between politicians and criminals.

Cecilio Pineda was one of more than 100 journalists murdered since 2000 in Mexico, one of the world's deadliest countries for reporters.

At the time that Turati appears to have been targeted through NSO, she and two colleagues were investigating the corruption scandal engulfing Brazilian conglomerate Odebrecht.

Emilio Lozoya, a former top advisor to Pena Nieto, has alleged that Odebrecht bribes were funneled to the ex-leader's presidential campaign.

Turati also investigated massacres of migrants and the disappearance of 43 teaching students in 2014, a case that drew widespread international condemnation.

Relatives of the missing students and human rights defenders were also targeted through NSO, according to the international probe by the Pegasus Project.

'Nobody's spied on'

Lopez Obrador, in power since 2018, has not commented directly on the revelations.

But he alluded to them in comments Monday related to the case of a missing journalist, saying that "nobody's spied on anymore. Freedoms are guaranteed."

The leaked list of smartphone numbers did not include Lopez Obrador himself, according to Aristegui Noticias.

The leftist leader "apparently did not use a personal cell phone" and communicated through his aides, it said.

NSO insists its software is only intended for use in fighting terrorism and other crimes.

Mexico was the first country in the world to buy Pegasus from NSO "and became something of a laboratory for the spy technology," according to The Guardian.

Mexican agencies that have acquired the [spyware](#) include the defense ministry, the attorney general's office and the national security intelligence service, it said.

Lopez Obrador's wife, children, brother and even his cardiologist were among those selected for potential surveillance using Pegasus malware between 2016 and 2017, according to Aristegui Noticias.

At the time, Lopez Obrador was the opposition leader and political rival of Pena Nieto.

Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, cabinet ministers and other officials of the current government were also identified as potential targets, it said.

There was a "persecutory practice of political espionage used by the old regime," Sheinbaum told Aristegui Noticias, whose director Carmen Aristegui also appears to have been targeted.

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