

Mexico asks for U.S. help in plane crash probe

Two high-level officials among 13 people killed

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MEXICO CITY — Mexican officials asked U.S. and British experts to aid in the investigation of a Mexico City plane crash that killed the government's second-ranking official and a high-level lawman.

The officials said the crash appeared to be an accident, but they were not ruling anything out.

Interior Minister Juan Camilo Mouriño and longtime anti-drug prosecutor Jose Luis Santiago Vasconcelos were among the 13 people killed Tuesday night when an executive jet crashed into rush-hour traffic.

All eight people aboard the plane died in the fiery crash, as well as five more on the ground. Some 40 other people were injured, a half-dozen of them critically.

There have been no indications the crash was anything other than an accident, said Transportation Secretary Luis Tellez. "But," he said, "it will be investigated until all possibilities are exhausted."

Violence from drug-gang wars and the deployment of thousands of troops and federal police has killed more than 3,000 people this year alone.

Sabotage suspected

Speculation was rampant Wednesday that the plane had been sabotaged. The crash was the first of its kind in Mexico City.

Experts from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board arrived in Mexico City on Wednesday to help with the investigation. Three British government investigators also were taking part.

"The United States will do all it can to assist in the investigation," said Tony Garza, the American ambassador.

Mexico City's media Tuesday night reported that the jet's pilots had issued a distress call shortly before the crash. But Tellez played conversations from the plane's flight recorder that suggested there were no indications of danger.

Radio went silent

After routine discussion about the doomed plane's impending landing, communication suddenly went silent.

The corporate jet slammed to earth under clear skies about 7 p.m. next to one of Mexico City's busiest intersections. The scene was near a

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major expressway and about a mile from President Felipe Calderon's offices and residence.

Dozens of cars were damaged in the crash, some bursting into flame with their occupants inside.

Officials evacuated about 1,200 people from the scene as police, firefighters and soldiers searched charred hulks of vehicles for the remains of bodies, many of which were burned beyond recognition.

The crash tore a gaping hole in Calderon's administration as he fights the drug syndicates and tries to shield Mexico from a global economic crisis, political analyst Federico Estevez said.

Mouriño, 37, was one of Calderon's closest aides and friends. He was the equivalent of Mexico's vice president. He served as the president's point man with Congress, especially the legislators from the opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, whose votes are needed by Calderon to get legislation passed.

Mouriño also headed Calderon's National Security Cabinet — composed of the attorney general, senior military commanders and the head of the federal Public Security Ministry.

"It's a blow to Calderon, who likes to govern with a tight inner circle," Estevez said. "He has to fill the gap quickly."

Santiago, who served in the Mexican attorney general's office since the early 1990s, led

Mexico's efforts against organized crime under former President Vicente Fox.

One of Mexico's foremost experts on the country's criminal gangs and their protection networks among officials, Santiago had only recently joined the presidential staff as a legal adviser.

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