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MIDDLE EAST

Egypt Bans News Coverage of Killings of Mexican Tourists

By JARED MALSIN SEPT. 17, 2015

CAIRO — Egypt’s chief prosecutor issued a ban on news media coverage in the case of a weekend attack by the security forces that killed 12 people, including eight Mexican tourists and their Egyptian guides.

The ban, issued Wednesday night, came after Egypt’s foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, promised a “prompt, thorough and transparent investigation” into the killings, according to a joint statement with Mexico’s foreign minister, Claudia Ruiz Massieu, who flew to Egypt seeking answers about Sunday’s attack.

Critics said the order could be part of an attempt to conceal the findings of any investigation into the killings.

“The government needs to cover up what really happened over there and basically not be embarrassed by what the investigation might bring — information confirming the role of the army in this sad event,” said Mohamed Lotfy, the director of the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, an independent watchdog group.

“Usually when there is such a ban on publication it has do with very tough cases where one could find evidence or embarrassing information about the involvement of some government high officials or military strongmen,” he said by telephone on Thursday.

The Egyptian government said this week that the crew of a helicopter gunship had fired on the tourists after taking them for insurgents in Egypt’s Western Desert. The group had stopped for a midday meal in the desert when the attack

took place.

The order applies to both domestic and international news media, including print, online and broadcast outlets, according to a statement from the prosecutor's office cited in news reports. It will remain in effect until the conclusion of an investigation by the Egyptian authorities, the statement said.

At a joint news conference in Cairo on Wednesday, Mr. Shoukry read out a statement agreed upon with his Mexican counterpart, expressing "the Egyptian government's deepest sympathy, regret and condolences to the government and people of Mexico."

"I hope that it is fully understood that it is the objective of the Egyptian government to scrutinize all of the potential circumstances related to this incident," Mr. Shoukry said at the news conference.

Separately on Thursday, family and associates identified two of those killed, according to news reports. One was Queta Rojas, the founder of a well-known modeling agency of the same name. Another was Maria Elena Cruz Muñoz, a former congresswoman from Guadalajara.

Human rights organizations said the killings were a sign of a broader problem of civilian deaths from the government's operations against insurgents in the Western Desert and the Sinai Peninsula.

"This killing is symptomatic, and it begs the question: How many times has it happened, that the army or police killed people by mistake?" said Mr. Lotfy of the human rights commission.

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