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Stolen helicopter attacks Venezuela's Supreme Court

Government hunts for rogue policeman as opposition claims raid was staged

Gideon Long, Andean correspondent

A police pilot and one-time movie star commandeered a helicopter and attacked Venezuela's Interior Ministry and Supreme Court with bullets and grenades in what the government said was evidence of coup-mongering, and some opponents dismissed as a staged farce.

The pilot circled over central Caracas on Tuesday, fired 15 shots at the ministry where around 80 people were attending a ceremony on a terrace and then dropped four grenades on the court building while it was in session, the government said in a statement.

It named the pilot as Oscar Alberto Pérez and said he worked for the investigative police force, known by its Spanish initials CICPC.

President Nicolás Maduro said it was clear evidence that Venezuela's rightwing opposition was trying to topple his government. He put his armed forces on full alert and there were unconfirmed reports of clashes close to the National Assembly on Tuesday night.

But as Venezuelans woke up to the bizarre news of the attack on Wednesday, the pilot's film-star past led some to claim on social media that the whole episode was staged by the government to distract attention from the country's severe political and economic crisis.

Mr Pérez starred in a 2015 action film called *Suspended Death*, or *Muerte Suspendida*, about a police rescue of a Venezuelan kidnap victim. Some of the scenes from the film bear an uncanny resemblance to Tuesday's events.

With a shaven head and piercing blue eyes, Mr Pérez has also posted videos of himself on Instagram, firing guns. On Tuesday, he posted one in which he appears in uniform, standing in front of several armed men with their faces covered.

In the video, Mr Pérez identifies himself and denounces the Maduro regime. "We are a coalition of military officials, policemen and civilians looking for equilibrium, and we are opposed to this transitory criminal government," he said. It was unclear if the footage was filmed before or after the helicopter attack.

The head of Venezuela's National Assembly Julio Borges expressed doubts about Mr Maduro's version of events, but he said it was still unclear what had happened.

"There are people who say it was a government-staged hoax, others who say it was real," he said in a radio interview. "Whatever it was, it all points in the same direction: that the situation in Venezuela is unsustainable."

Videos and photos of the helicopter circling over Caracas were plastered over social media. In one of the photos, which the FT could not verify, the pilot's face is clearly visible and he looks like Mr Pérez from his Instagram videos. The blue helicopter carries CICPC insignia.

The government later announced it had found the helicopter — but not its pilot — near Venezuela's northern coast.

In its statement read out by communications minister Ernesto Villegas and posted on YouTube, the government said it was investigating links between Mr Pérez, the US embassy in Caracas and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The government frequently claims that Washington is trying to foment a coup in Venezuela.

The Opec nation has been convulsed by protests since late March, with demonstrators calling for Mr Maduro to step down and abandon his plans for a new assembly with powers to re-write the constitution. Around 80 people have been killed in clashes between anti-government protesters and the military police.

On Wednesday the EU issued a statement calling for an end to the confrontations. "Following yesterday's events the tensions and violence seem to have gone a step further," it said.

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