

Written by Administrator
Thursday, 14 February 2013 22:10 -

PUERTO VALLARTA, Mexico -- When municipal inspectors slapped 13 seals on doors leading into the Casino Vallarta one afternoon a few months ago, they had good reason to shut the gaming house down.

The sprawling casino lacked fire extinguishers, smoke detectors and signs indicating emergency exits. It also hadn't provided authorities with proof that its carpeting contained a fire retardant.

What happened in the minutes after the seals went on the doors at 3:41 p.m. on Nov. 14, 2012, hints not only at the disorderly state of Mexico's gaming industry, but at the power wielded by former senior officials in the Interior Secretariat who left their jobs to become casino brokers and operators. Even basic requirements to keep the Mexican citizenry – and U.S. tourists – safe couldn't withstand them.

It also sheds new light on the influence the gaming industry had in the administration of President Felipe Calderon, whose administration issued 94 new gaming permits in the final hours before Calderon's term ended Dec. 1 – despite Calderon's pledge that no new permits would be issued until regulations were in place to govern the chaotic gaming industry. The three former senior officials linked to the casino all reported to a close associate of Calderon who once ran for the governorship of Jalisco state, where Puerto Vallarta is located, on behalf of the National Action Party, Calderon's political party.

Calderon is now a fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

The seals on the Casino Vallarta doors lasted half an hour before the city's public security chief, Silvestre Chavez, ordered the casino reopened. Three months later, no new inspection has been conducted, and Chavez, a retired army colonel, seems to be in no hurry to order one.

He said he'd joined some friends for a soft drink inside the Casino Vallarta about three weeks ago and gave a look around. "I didn't observe any dangerous situation, or any situation that required emergency action," he said.

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The Casino Vallarta, with its red-and-black motif and poker insignia on the outside walls, draws a steady crowd, including many Americans and Canadians. Cruise ships dock throughout the year here, coming to a wharf right in front of the casino. Puerto Vallarta is Mexico's second most visited resort, drawing 3 million tourists a year.

Among the municipal representatives at the casino that afternoon in November was Susana Mendoza Carreno, a feisty councilwoman who is the point person on issues of citizen protection.

As soon as Carreno came to office Nov. 1, she started working with inspectors to ensure that casinos, public schools, gas stations and daycare centers all were up to code. Such facilities have an appalling safety record in recent years, and she thought it would be in the public interest to assure their safety.

Indeed, only 15 months earlier, 52 people died in a casino in Monterrey in Mexico's northeast, when gangsters armed with assault weapons and gasoline canisters entered the gaming hall one weekday afternoon, apparently angry that the owner hadn't met an extortion demand, and set it ablaze.

Several of that casino's emergency exits were locked.

A June 2009 fire that raged through a daycare center in Hermosillo in Sonora state killed 49 tots and injured 76 others, all of them age 5 or younger. The daycare center had no fire extinguishers or smoke detectors.

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