

AP Exclusive: Colombia 'panic buttons' expose activists

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In this March 23, 2017, photo, Amalfi Rosales, a Colombian journalist whose exposes of corruption forced her to flee, holds a GPS-enabled "panic button" that Colombia's government has issued in Bogota. The pocket-sized device is designed to summon help for human-rights activists or journalists if they are threatened. But it has technical flaws that could let hostile parties disable it, eavesdrop on conversations and track users' movements, according to an independent security audit conducted for The Associated Press. (AP Photo/Arturo Robles)

It is supposed to help protect human-rights activists, labor organizers and journalists working in risky environments, but a GPS-enabled "panic button" that Colombia's government has issued to about 400 people could be exposing them to more peril.

The pocket-sized devices are designed to notify authorities in the event of an attack or attempted kidnapping. But the Associated Press, with an independent security audit, uncovered technical flaws that could let hostile parties disable them, eavesdrop on conversations and track users' movements.

There is no evidence the vulnerabilities have been exploited, but security experts are alarmed.

"This is negligent in the extreme," said Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity at the nonprofit Electronic Frontier Foundation, calling the finding "a tremendous security failure."

Over the past four years, other "distress alarms" and smartphone apps have been deployed or tested around the world, with mixed results. When effective, they can be crucial lifelines against criminal gangs, paramilitary groups or the hostile security forces of repressive regimes.

REASON FOR PANIC

The panic button, or "boton de apoyo," distributed by Colombia's Office of National Protection is a keychain-style fob. Its Chinese manufacturer markets it under the name EV-07 for tracking children, pets and the elderly. The device operates on a wireless network, has a built-in microphone and receiver and can be mapped remotely with geo-location software. A button marked "SOS" calls for help when pressed.

But some features could be turned against the user, the security audit done for the AP by the Boston-based security firm Rapid7 found. The AP tested two devices issued in Colombia, while Rapid7 bought buttons directly from the manufacturer.

The most serious vulnerability lets anyone with the device's phone number remotely disable it and surreptitiously take control. Simple text messages can reset it or activate the microphone remotely, turning it into a listening post, the audit found. Built-in GPS pinpoints the user's location.

Because the device can be remotely wiped, it can also be reconfigured from afar, said Deral Heiland, the researcher with Rapid7 who performed the audit.

Obtaining the Colombian device's phone number is not easy, and the government said it alone knows to whom each device is assigned.

But security experts said there are ways a sophisticated adversary could obtain the numbers, including fake cell tower technology that captures numbers and bribes to cell company or government employees.

Office of National Protection Director Diego Mora called the flaws identified in the AP audit overblown. He said activists given the device are at such low risk there would be little interest in eavesdropping on them.

"It's a very, very basic protection measure for people whose risks aren't very complex," said Mora. "Supreme Court judges, ministers, prosecutors, they don't have this device."

Recipients said the dangers they face should not be underestimated. Some have received death threats, been kidnapped or forced into exile.

They complain that the body armor and cellphones assigned with panic buttons are inadequate.

"What am I going to do with body armor riding the bus?" said Amalfi Rosales, a journalist from the northeastern Guajira region whose exposes of corruption forced her to flee. "How does that protect me?"

EASY-TO-FIND INSTRUCTIONS

Instructions for resetting the Colombia-issued panic button and activating its "silent phone" function were easy to find. They are spelled out in a user manual posted online by the manufacturer, Eview Industrial Ltd.

A company official, John Chung, acknowledged that Rapid7 notified him of the flaws in December. In keeping with standard industry practice, Rapid7 waited at least two months before publicly disclosing the vulnerabilities to give the manufacturer time to address them.

Chung told the AP that Eview was working to update the EV-07's webserver software, where Rapid7 found flaws that could allow user and geolocation data to be altered.

The audit confirmed suspicions that arose after independent Colombian journalist Claudia Julieta Duque reported in August that the devices have built-in microphones. The government had not told recipients, and many stopped using the panic buttons.

"To me, it's just a device to spy on you," said Rocio Campos, an activist in the Magdalena River refinery city of Barrancabermeja whose brother was disappeared in 1998 and who has been helping prosecutors search

for unmarked graves.



In this March 16, 2017 photo, an Associated Press employee in Bogota, Colombia holds a GPS-enabled "panic button" that Colombia's government has issued to labor, community and human rights activists in risky environments. With help from an independent security audit, The Associated Press determined that the palm-sized device designed to summon help in the event of an attack or attempted kidnapping has technical flaws that could let hostile parties disable it, eavesdrop on conversations and track users' movements. (AP Photo/Fernando Vergara)

Mora denies that the devices can listen in on users. The device's local provider, cellular carrier Comcel S.A., "made the necessary modifications so that one could not activate the microphone or know the device's location without pressing the button," he said.

AP's findings contradict that claim.

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Activists have good reason to be wary of public officials in Colombia, where murder rates for land and labor activists are among the world's highest, and there is a legacy of state-sponsored crime.

The DAS domestic intelligence agency, which provided bodyguards and armored vehicles to high-risk individuals prior to 2011, was disbanded after being caught spying on judges, journalists and activists.

Five former DAS officials have been prosecuted for allegedly subjecting Duque and her daughter to psychological torture after she published articles implicating agency officials in the 1999 assassination of Jaime Garzon, a much-loved satirist.

Tanya O'Carroll of Amnesty International, which has been developing a different kind of "panic button" since 2014, said the Colombian model is fundamentally flawed.

"In many cases, the government is the adversary," she said. "How can those people who are the exact adversary be the ones that are best placed to respond?"

Mora rejected any suggestion that his office, which offers protective services to some 6,500 people, distributed panic buttons with the intent of spying on activists.

"We're at ease," he said. He was unable to cite an instance of a panic button saving life or helping to extract someone from danger.

When the "SOS" button is pressed, it notifies a 24/7 operations center at the office's Bogota headquarters. Operators place a call to the user and, if the person is in danger, notify police.

Campos was not carrying a device in September when two men on a motorcycle tried to topple her motorbike at a stoplight. One pulled a gun, and she sped away to a nearby police post, bending forward to make a smaller target.

"No one has time to activate any button much less wait to be called and asked, 'What happened?'" she said.

A Colombian land-rights activist, Astrid Sabogal of Pereira, said she pressed the button last year when she was out of town and men broke into their house and stole documents in the presence of her 11-year-old son. The device did not work. She was later assigned armed protection.

BUTTONED UP

In Mexico, the attorney general's office has issued more than 200 emergency alert devices to journalists and rights activists since 2013. But there have been multiple complaints .

One is unreliability where cell service is poor. Others are more serious: Cases have been documented of police failing to respond or answering but saying they are unable to help.

O'Carroll of Amnesty International said trials in 17 nations on three continents—including the Philippines, El Salvador and Uganda—show it's best to alert trusted parties—friends, family or colleagues. Those people then reach out to trusted authorities.

Sweden-based Civil Rights Defenders offers a 300-euro stand-alone panic button first deployed in Russia's North Caucasus region in 2013 and now used by more than 70 people in East Africa, Central Asia, the Balkans, Southeast Asia and Venezuela, said Peter Ohlm, a protection officer at the nonprofit.

The organization's Stockholm headquarters always gets notified, and social media is typically leveraged to spread word fast when an activist is in trouble.

Amnesty's app for Android phones is still in beta testing. It is activated with a hardware trigger—multiple taps of the power button. But there have been too many false alarms.

Norma Trujillo is a reporter in Veracruz, one of Mexico's most dangerous states for journalists. She was issued a panic button by the attorney general's office two years ago. She does not believe it would help in an emergency, but she has no plans to return the device, believing it puts the onus of protecting her on the state.

"It raises one's political cost," she said.

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