

Directorate of
Intelligence

**Latin America
Review**

18 May 1990

El Salvador: Cleaning Up the Military

Public and internal criticism of the military's image and effectiveness has intensified since the insurgent offensive last November, increasing pressure on the High Command to confront human rights abuses, corruption, and incompetence in the officer corps. Thus far, reform efforts have focused principally on removing some members of the military academy class—or *tanda*—of 1966, which holds many senior leadership positions. Although this class—known as the *Tandona* because of its large size—assumed its positions only last year, critics, including the government, the US Embassy, and junior officers, already are calling for the dismissal of many class members from their command posts. In April, the High Command transferred two long-criticized *Tandona* members, but failed to make other anticipated changes, including the long-awaited promotion of Chief of Staff Ponce—a *Tandona* member generally regarded as a reformer—to Minister of Defense.

The Defense Attache Dilemma

Over the years, the military has taken care of undesirable elements in the officer corps by "exiling" them to well-paid defense attache jobs, where they can preserve their pensions and pursue their own businesses. The "exiles" typically are officers accused of human rights abuses or corruption who are considered politically unsuitable by civil authorities or the Army High Command. [redacted] indicates that the class of 1966 supported the ousting of the following senior officers because they stood in the way of ambitious *Tandona* members who wanted to move up:

- Col. Denis Morán, now the defense attache in Guatemala, has also filled attache positions in Washington and Colombia. In 1979 he [redacted] directed a rightist terrorist group called the White Warriors Union. He headed the National Guard intelligence section in the early 1980s, when it was linked to death squad activities, and was implicated in

the murders of three land reform experts in a San Salvador hotel in 1981.

- Gen. Adolfo Blumón serves as defense attache in Washington following his removal as Chief of Staff last year. [redacted]

- Col. Oscar Rodolfo Campos Araya is the defense attache in Brazil and has also served in Washington. While commanding the 1st Brigade, [redacted] blocked an investigation into alleged human rights abuses by his company. [redacted]

The *Tandona*'s Record

More recently, the *Tandona* has resisted cleaning up the military. [redacted] indicates that the class of 1966 does not want to see its preeminence curtailed by reforms that place merit and accountability above loyalty and tradition—the values emphasized by the *tanda* system. Chief of Staff Ponce, although aware that disgruntled junior officers are demanding wholesale changes, has been reluctant to defy class unity and purge the *Tandona*. Ponce also has not complied with a request from President Cristiani last year, [redacted] to remove certain officers.

Ponce, who repeatedly tells US officials he believes reform is desirable, has responded to critics pressing for change by stressing the need to minimize the disruption of the officer corps during the war. [redacted]

Ponce wants to avoid the perception of caving in to the Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which is demanding the dismantling of the *Tandona* as part of any political settlement. [redacted]

[REDACTED] that Ponce believes he can control junior officer discontent. [REDACTED]

Nevertheless, the Chief of Staff has demonstrated his willingness to make some concessions by "exiling" four Tawdwa members to defense attaché positions:

- Col. Natividad Jesus Caceres now serves as the defense attaché in Chile after being removed from his command post last year on charges of corruption, brutality, extortion, and an armed confrontation last year with the US Ambassador.
- Col. Carlos Mauricio Guzman Aguilar was recently reassigned as the defense attaché in Costa Rica after an investigation—ordered last fall by Cristiani—of allegations of incompetence and corruption. He previously headed the National Police and the National Intelligence Directorate.
- Col. Roberto Staben, a military detachment commander, has been appointed attaché in Honduras. Although he is reputed to be an effective commander, he had been exiled to an area of little combat activity because of allegations of a pattern of abuses of authority, human rights violations, and corruption over a long period, including earlier involvement in a kidnapping ring.
- Col. Humberto Villalta, commander of the Navy, has been appointed attaché in Spain. Last fall Cristiani ordered Ponce to investigate Villalta on charges of corruption, specifically of using Navy fuel to power his shrimp boats. [REDACTED]

Other long-denounced commanders escaped transfer in the most recent series of changes, but [REDACTED] indicates pressure continues to build for their removal.

- Col. Jose Emilio Chavez Caceres commands the 5th Brigade. He is suspected of involvement in a possible coverup of an investigation after his troops executed 10 peasants suspected of FMLN affiliations last year.
- Col. Hector Heriberto Hernandez was reassigned early this year to command the 6th Brigade, a move that angered critics demanding his placement in a noncommand position. He previously had directed the Treasury Police, where he [REDACTED] was widely disliked because of incompetence and corruption. [REDACTED]

Outlook

Junior officers complained directly to the President last year about the incompetence and corruption of many Tawdwa members, and the failure to make changes faster is likely to encourage more unhappiness in junior officer ranks. These officers, increasingly concerned about their own progress upward, probably will be especially dissatisfied over the repeated delay in promoting Ponce to Minister of Defense—a move that would trigger advancement of lower academy classes. The ouster of senior commanders, in our view, would be an important step toward weakening the *tawda* tradition and paving the way for a system of promotions and assignments based on merit rather than class loyalties. Moreover, we believe such a reform would go a long way toward improving the effectiveness of the military and making it more responsive to civil authority. The precedent also could preempt problems with the next large *tawda*, the class of 1973, whose members were recently promoted to lieutenant colonel. [REDACTED]

El Salvador Chronology

March - April 1990

-
- 1 March** Air, naval, and ground forces launch an operation on the southeastern coast to deny logistic resupply to the FMLN before the inauguration of the new government in Managua.
- 5 March** [REDACTED] says the FMLN intends to attack a commercial airliner with surface-to-air missiles.
- 6 March** Insurgents attack a military helicopter carrying Attorney General Colorado to the exhumation of five civilians killed in a resettlement camp last month. One person is killed, and nine of the 11 on board are wounded.
- The office of the Christian Committee for the Displaced reopens three months after closing.
- The Armed Forces announce plans for continued nationwide offensive operations to interdict FMLN logistic resupply operations and protect the country's economic infrastructure. (S NP)
- 7 March** [REDACTED] says the rebels will temporarily suspend logistic operations in the regions of [REDACTED] Southern Usulután Department, because of the Armed Forces presence in the area.
- 8 March** A civilian jury convicts 26 civil defense members for the rape and massacre of 23 peasants in 1981.
- Rebels bomb several businesses and engage the military in a few small-scale skirmishes around San Salvador.
- 9 March** Some 150 rebels attack a coffee plant in Usulután Department, killing four soldiers and wounding six.
- At least 10 rebels are killed during an 18-hour hour attack against Ciudad Barrios in northern San Miguel. The attack force is estimated at 250 to 300.

13 March

A group of insurgents barricade roads into [REDACTED] in Usulután Department and hold the town hostage for five hours, leaving when Air Force helicopters fly over the area. [REDACTED]

The FMLN unveils a series of unilateral steps it will initiate on 16 March to seek a peaceful solution to the war, including suspending some sabotage operations and halting assassination attempts against civilian officials. [REDACTED]

14 March

Suspected FMLN members attack and wound an Air Force pilot and his two brothers outside their home in San Salvador. [REDACTED]

15 March

A judge imprisons two Army sergeants accused of murder and rape. [REDACTED]

A group of former Army soldiers asks the Legislative Assembly to approve an amnesty for as many as 200 soldiers implicated in crimes "committed in the line of duty." [REDACTED]

16 March

A Honduran Army patrol surveilling a deserted FMLN base camp discovers a cache of six field-expedition mines, one rifle grenade, wiring material for booby traps, and FMLN propaganda documents. [REDACTED]

The FMLN attacks 2nd Military Detachment soldiers patrolling near a displaced persons camp in Cabañas Department. [REDACTED]

Judge Zamora, the head of the investigation into the Jesuit murders on 16 November 1989, meets for the first time with Colonel Rivas, the director of the Special Investigations Unit. [REDACTED]

18 March

The FMLN destroys electrical posts and burns two buses, violating its suspension of sabotage operations and attacks against civilians. [REDACTED]

19 March

The FMLN conducts three drive-by shootings, one against the Guatemalan Embassy in San Salvador, killing two policemen and wounding two civilians. [REDACTED]

20 March

An FMLN delegation meets with Venezuelan President Pérez and reportedly seeks his assistance in achieving peace in El Salvador. [REDACTED]

The FMLN attacks the Civil Defense post at San Francisco del Monte, Cabañas Department, killing four soldiers, and wounding five. [REDACTED]

21 March

[REDACTED]

Sectional Infantry Brigade members engage rebels in the area of Las Vueltas, Chalatenango Department for over 11 hours. Some 12 insurgents are killed, and 13 soldiers are wounded. After the battle, two soldiers are killed and four wounded during an ambush of the land evacuation. [REDACTED]

22 March

Press reports indicate El Salvador has unilaterally decided to suspend the transit of Nicaraguan trucks or containers transporting merchandise through Salvadoran territory. [REDACTED]

The son-in-law of the Air Force commander, Gen. Rafael Villamaron, is seriously wounded during a kidnapping attempt in San Salvador. [REDACTED]

24 March

Between 5,000 and 7,000 people, many of them foreigners, attend a march commemorating the 10th anniversary of Archbishop Romero's assassination. [REDACTED]

26 March

A member [REDACTED] says urban commandos are discussing plans to harass Americans in San Salvador. [REDACTED]

Two 5th Brigade soldiers and a national policeman, all explosives experts, are killed while trying to deactivate a mine. [REDACTED]

27 March

The National Unity of Salvadoran Workers, the largest Marxist labor umbrella organization, reopens its labor institute, which was closed and occupied by members of the 1st brigade on 17 November 1985. [REDACTED]

The government's Human Rights Commission completes a preliminary investigation into the killings of Efraim and Cristina Cabrera on 10 March by uniformed soldiers, who allegedly also robbed and raped other family members. [REDACTED]

28 March

Seven civil defense members are convicted for the murders and robbery of four people in Sonsonate Department in 1984. [REDACTED]

A 6th Military Detachment sergeant is convicted of the murders of two Guatemalan businessmen traveling on the Pan-American Highway in 1983. [REDACTED]

A Signal Training Center patrol detects a group of insurgents moving toward the Presidential Palace, apparently to launch a harassment attack. The FMLN fires a light antitank weapon in the resulting firefight. [REDACTED]

29 March

President Cristiani begins a three-day visit to Venezuela. [REDACTED]

30 March

The Army takes out a newspaper ad to express its support of President Cristiani's peace efforts.

reports that the Revolutionary Party of Central America Workers is planning to seize small arms from military personnel and civilians in San Salvador.

2 April

A car bomb explodes outside the National Police Academy, killing six people, including four cadets, and wounding 27 cadets and four civilians.

5 April

Commandos from the 6th Brigade find two FMLN weapon caches containing more than 11,000 rounds of ammunition and 200 pounds of explosives near

6 April

The Atlacatl Infantry Battalion raids an FMLN camp in , killing four guerrillas and capturing three AK-47 rifles and an assortment of war materiel.

7 April

Honduran personnel discover a truck carrying arms and explosives traveling toward the Salvadoran border. The cargo includes 24 AKM assault rifles, 78 ammunition rounds, 16 pounds of TNT, and five rolls of detonation cord.

Information from a Honduran results in the arrest of two rebels transporting arms from Honduras and the discovery of an FMLN safehouse.

8 April

Jose Tomas Mazariego, the Secretary General of the Leftist Federated Association of Independent Unions of El Salvador, is killed in an automobile accident.

11 April

The FMLN launches a harassment attack against 6th Brigade troops in the San Marcos Lengua area.

16 April

Unknown assailants assassinate Roberto Huczo Nativ, the justice of the peace in La Union Department, in his home.

reports the Salvadoran Communist Party/Armed Forces of Liberation is working to form a clandestine political structure at the National University of El Salvador.

17 April

Chief of Staff Colonel Ponce begins a week-long visit to Taiwan.

20 April

Teachers in Soyapango stage a one-day work stoppage to protest the arrest of the former secretary of arbitration of a leftist teachers' union.

21 April

Special Units of the 4th Military Detachment operating in Jocositique engage in a series of firefights with the FMLN. Seven insurgents are killed.

A car explosion kills Dr. Rodofo Heredia Tejada, a leftist professor at the University of El Salvador.

22 April

Former Army Colonel Ochoa alleges on a US television program that senior officers other than Colonel Benavides—including Vice Defense Minister Colonel Zapeda—were involved in the decision to kill the Jesuits last November.

Colonel Zapeda denies allegations of his involvement in the Jesuit murders and offers to testify before the judge.

25 April

Judge Zamora denies a defense motion to change the venue of the Jesuit case. He also requests that members of the Honor Board testify before the court.

27 April

An unidentified armed group reportedly murders five suspected drug dealers in western El Salvador over the course of a week.

28 April

The charges against all but two of the nine military defendants accused in the San Sebastian massacre of 10 peasants in September 1983 are dismissed. Charges remain against the major who allegedly gave the order.