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P 141420Z APR 86
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY

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E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PINS, PHUM, ES
SUBJECT: RESPONSE ON ARCATAO

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Oscar Olson, Senior Reviewer

1. C - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. DEPARTMENT HAS RECEIVED NUMEROUS TELEPHONE INQUIRIES ON ESAF OPERATIONS IN ARCATAO; WE EXPECT A DELUGE OF WRITTEN INQUIRIES TO FOLLOW VERY SOON. FOLLOWING IS PROPOSED RESPONSE. PLEASE PROVIDE COMMENTS ASAP, INCLUDING ON UNCLASSIFIED REFERENCES TO "GROUND RECONNAISSANCE TROOPS." PLEASE ALSO CONFIRM WHETHER ONE OR TWO TONS OF MEDICAL SUPPLIES WERE FOUND IN THE LARGE TATU. PLEASE ALSO ADVISE OF ICRC, CHURCH, HUMAN RIGHTS GROUP, OR OTHER NEUTRAL-OBSERVER INVOLVEMENT IN THE OPERATION.

3. BEGIN TEXT.

ARCATAO IS A MUNICIPALITY IN THE NORTHEASTERN PART OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHALATENANGO, AN AREA WHICH HAS BEEN A GUERRILLA STRONGHOLD SINCE THE MID 1970'S. ARCATAO WAS
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ONE OF THE FEW MUNICIPALITIES WHERE BALLOTING DID NOT TAKE PLACE IN LAST YEAR'S ELECTIONS, BECAUSE OF THE INSURGENT THREAT. SOME 500 PEOPLE STILL LIVE IN ARCATAO;

ITS POPULATION FORMERLY NUMBERED ABOUT 1500.

THE MILITARY OPERATION UNDERWAY IN NORTHEASTERN CHALATENANGO BEGAN MARCH 7. ON APRIL 8, SALVADORAN ARMY UNITS WERE IN ARCATAO AND THE SURROUNDING AREA AS PART OF THE LARGER OPERATION. DURING THE COURSE OF THEIR

PATROLLING THEY DISCOVERED A LARGE CAVE CONTAINING WEAPONS, AMMUNITION AND APPROXIMATELY ONE TON OF GUERRILLA MEDICAL SUPPLIES, MOSTLY OF NON-U.S. ORIGIN -- AN INDICATION OF THE EXTENSIVE USE OF THE REGION BY THE INSURGENTS.

OUR EMBASSY IN SAN SALVADOR HAS LOOKED INTO ALLEGATIONS OF UNRESTRAINED OR INDISCRIMINATE BOMBING AGAINST NON-COMBATANTS AND CIVILIAN FACILITIES IN ARCATAO; THEY HAVE PROVEN TO BE BASELESS. AIRBORNE FIRE WAS COORDINATED BY GROUND RECONNAISSANCE TROOPS WHO CONFIRMED THE LOCATION OF GUERRILLA GROUPS. OTHER REPORTS THAT THE LOCAL MILITARY COMMANDER HAS THREATENED TO BOMB ARCATAO IF IT WAS NOT EVACUATED BY APRIL 12 ARE EQUALLY FALSE.

OUR EXAMINATION OF THE SITUATION AROUND ARCATAO INDICATES THAT THE SALVADORAN FORCES HAVE BEEN SCRUPULOUS IN THEIR EFFORTS TO AVOID HARM TO NON-COMBATANTS WHILE ATTEMPTING TO GRAPPLE WITH A WELL-TRAINED, ARMED, AND EXPERIENCED INSURGENT FORCE OF THE FPL, EL SALVADOR'S OLDEST INSURGENT GROUP AND A CONSTITUTENT OF THE FDR/FMLN INSURGENT ALLIANCE. THIS IS TRUE EVEN THOUGH THE INSURGENTS WERE USING THE TOWN ITSELF, NOT JUST ITS

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ENVIRONS, AS AN OPERATIONAL BASE. UPON ENTERING THE TOWN, GROUND TROOPS CAME UNDER FIRE FROM 30-40 FPL COMBATANTS.

ALLEGATIONS OF SALVADORAN MILITARY ATTACKS AGAINST NON-COMBATANTS FOLLOW A LONG-ESTABLISHED PATTERN OF DISINFORMATION, MOST RECENTLY SEEN IN PROTESTS AGAINST MILITARY ABUSES -- WHICH NEVER TOOK PLACE -- DURING A MAJOR OPERATION ON THE GUAZAPA VOLCANO EARLIER THIS YEAR. IN THE FACE OF BATTLEFIELD REVERSES, THE INSURGENTS ATTEMPT TO IMPEDE SALVADORAN MILITARY OPERATIONS BY PROVIDING WRONG INFORMATION TO WELL-MEANING, CONCERNED U.S. CITIZENS, IN THE HOPE THAT THEY WILL BRING PRESSURE TO BEAR AGAINST THE OPERATION. ALLEGATIONS OF INDISCRIMINATE BOMBING ARE AN INVARIABLE ELEMENT OF THIS CAMPAIGN (AND THEREFORE ONE THAT WE HAVE LOOKED INTO MOST CLOSELY). ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT DENY THAT ERRORS OCCASIONALLY OCCUR, THE SALVADORAN MILITARY'S COMMITMENT TO PROSECUTING THE WAR AGAINST THE INSURGENTS WITH MINIMUM HARM TO CIVILIAN NON-COMBATANTS IS CLEAR.

THE SALVADORAN MILITARY CONCERN FOR NON-COMBATANTS STANDS IN MARKED CONTRAST TO THE TACTICS OF THE INSURGENTS THEMSELVES, WHO ARE INCREASINGLY EMPLOYING URBAN TERRORISM, INDISCRIMINATE MINING OF RURAL PATHS, AND ECONOMIC SABOTAGE TO ATTACK "SOFT" TARGETS AND DISRUPT CIVILIAN LIFE. ON JUNE 19, AN INSURGENT DEATH SQUAD

MACHINE-GUNNED A CAFE IN SAN SALVADOR; THIRTEEN PERSONS WERE KILLED INCLUDING FOUR OFF-DUTY U.S. MARINE GUARDS AND TWO PRIVATE U.S. CITIZENS. GUERRILLA MINE WARFARE MAIMED AND KILLED MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED CIVILIANS DURING 1985; OVER HALF WERE CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 15. GUERRILLA ATTEMPTS TO BLOCK THE HIGHWAYS HAVE RESULTED IN THE MURDER OF NUMEROUS CIVILIANS WHEN BUSES AND OTHER VEHICLES WERE FIRED UPON. AN FPL SQUAD, DISGUISED IN MILITARY UNIFORMS, MASSACRED 21 MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN
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IN THE VILLAGE OF SANTA CRUZ LOMA ON APRIL 8, 1985, IN A TRANSPARENT ATTEMPT TO BRING BLAME UPON THE SALVADORAN MILITARY.

THE WIDESPREAD ALLEGATIONS OF MISCONDUCT BY THE SALVADORAN ARMED FORCES IN ARCATAO ARE MORE A MEASURE OF OF GUERRILLA DESPERATION TO HALT OPERATIONS THERE THAN OF MILITARY INDISCIPLINE.
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