

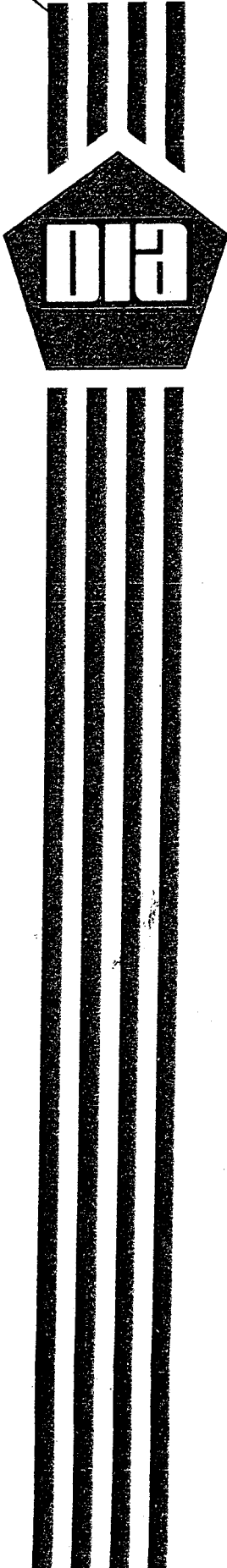
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Intelligence Appraisal

El Salvador:
Military-Guerrilla
Balance (U)

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Intelligence Appraisal

El Salvador: Military-Guerrilla Balance (U)

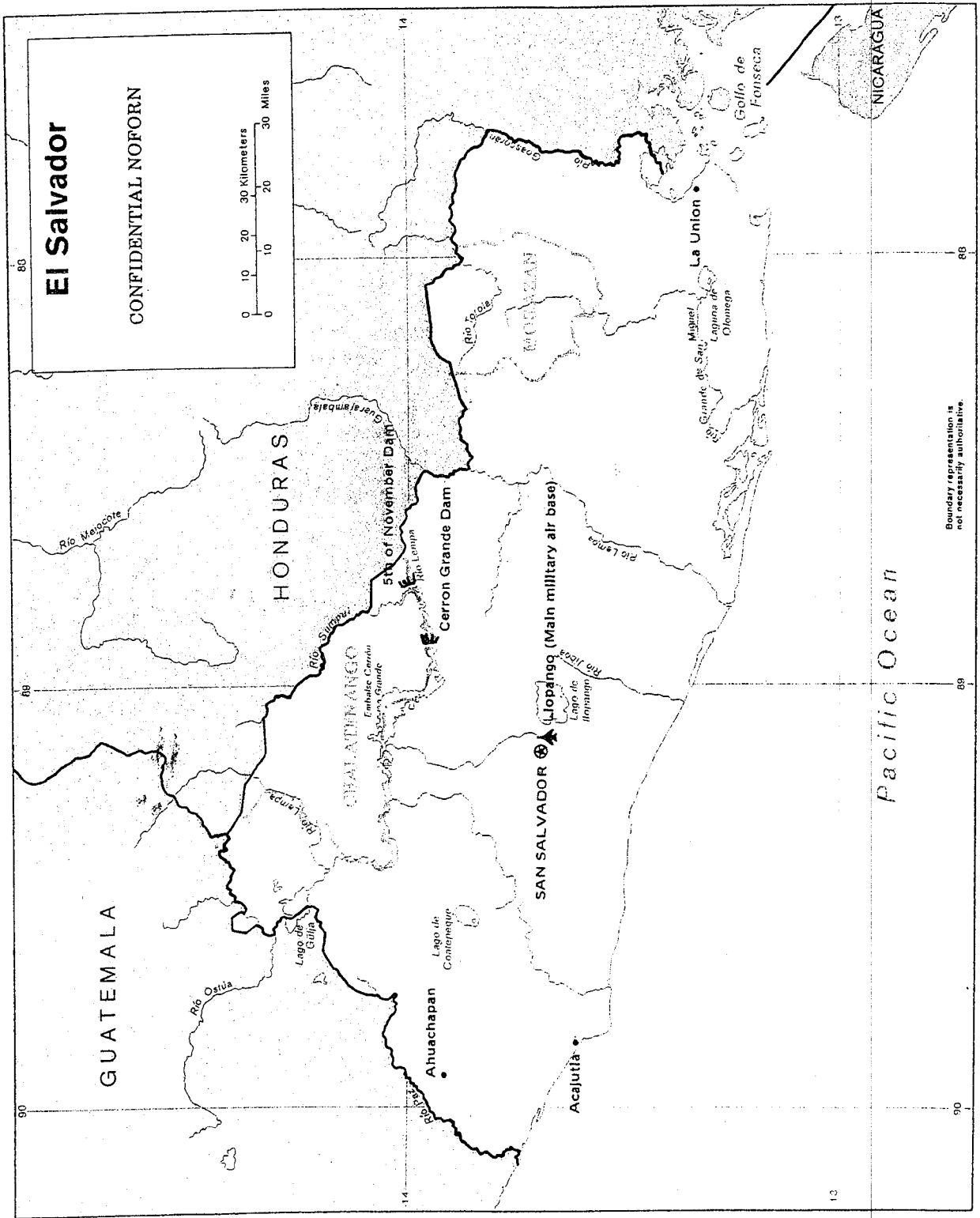
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MILITARY-GUERRILLA BALANCE



El Salvador
 CONFIDENTIAL NOFORN

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EL SALVADOR: MILITARY-GUERRILLA BALANCE (U)

Summary

(S/NOFORN) The present situation in El Salvador is characterized as a virtual stalemate, with neither the government nor the guerrillas able to defeat the other militarily. The insurgents have avoided conventional confrontation and are concentrating on sabotage and harassment in a war of economic and military attrition. The government's massive sweeps have temporarily dislodged them and temporarily disrupted and damaged their infrastructure and organizations. However, it lacks sufficient resources to simultaneously defend its own infrastructure and successfully attack the guerrillas countrywide. The insurgents will remain capable of overrunning isolated outposts, temporarily holding towns, and conducting economic sabotage. Government military prospects depend upon the development and implementation of a realistic and acceptable central strategy addressing the political and economic situations as well as the security aspects.

Discussion

Background and Course of War

(U) The Salvadoran insurgency is characterized by well-armed insurgent units, support personnel, and known guerrilla strongholds. Its origins can be traced to the urban terrorism that began in the 1970s. In 1980, largely as a result of Cuban influence, the generally antagonistic leftist political-military groups formed a fragile union that subsequently evolved into an effective threat to the government.

(C/NOFORN) During October 1980, the Salvadoran military conducted its first significant counterinsurgency sweep against the guerrillas. Since then, both the government forces and the insurgents have engaged in a seemingly inconclusive and protracted war. Superficially at least, the conflict can be described as a stand-off, despite occasional military peaks and valleys by both sides.

(U) The guerrillas took the military initiative during January 1981, when they launched the so-called "final offensive" after months of intense arms deliveries. Although Nicaragua served as the forward support base for funnelling these arms to El Salvador, sources included Communist nations and radical Arab states. While the offensive was ambitious in its nationwide scope and secured international news media coverage for El Salvador's militant left, its military objective of a national uprising by the general population under insurgent direction concurrent with a rebellion of military garrisons was a dismal failure. A hard-pressed but unified Salvadoran military defeated the guerrilla attempt after about 10 days of combat.

(C) After a short period of recuperation, the insurgents initiated a campaign of classic hit-and-run guerrilla warfare. Generally, every few months they have either launched another large offensive or destroyed a high-visibility target. This serialization of relatively large offensives interspersed with hit-and-run attacks has marked the course of the war since January 1981. Beyond the military considerations, the cumulative effect of almost daily guerrilla attacks on the national infrastructure has battered the economy. Simultaneously, the insurgents have consistently waged a political/propaganda offensive, both within the country and overseas. This campaign, couched in Western democratic terminology, has played on a "David against Goliath" theme and has scored significant successes abroad.

(U) While the Salvadoran military establishment has improved its capabilities, both qualitatively and quantitatively since 1980, the essential political ingredient of any successful counterinsurgency war continues to elude the government. Until the central government can bring the kind of secure environment and economic development to rally support among the general population, there will be a sense that the Army's counterinsurgency campaigns only inflict brief setbacks on the insurgents and that the war has not been won.

Guerrilla Trends and Capabilities

(S/NOFORN) Full-time regular or first-line guerrilla forces number between 4,000 and 5,000. This figure, while generally agreed upon, is highly speculative because of the absence of firm data or consistent reporting sources. At no time have the first-line insurgents ever been estimated at more than 6,000 combatants.

(S/NOFORN) Part-time militia or second-line guerrilla support forces are estimated to range from 4,000 to 5,000, and some analysts have placed their number at 7,000 to 10,000. The differentiation in function and role among the various force categories has become increasingly blurred as guerrilla operational needs draw upon personnel from all categories. There are sufficient weapons available to arm both categories of combatants, but guerrilla security and infrastructure support requirements would preclude the fielding of the entire force theoretically available.

(S/NOFORN) In addition, there is an unknown number of followers or supporters who travel with or reside within areas of guerrilla control. While the followers have been a burden to the guerrilla fighters during intense combat situations, the insurgent high command has generally been reluctant to surrender followers to international aid agencies or the central government, except under extreme duress. In fact, the followers constitute the citizenry of a potential shadow government and are known to provide supply support for the fighters as well as frequently forming part of an intelligence/courier network.

(S/NOFORN) The insurgent forces remain active throughout the nation with the greatest concentration in the northern Department of Chalatenango and the area east of the Lempa River, especially in the Department of Morazan.

(S/NOFORN) The primary military objective of the insurgents is still to overthrow the present government and substitute their own. To this end, the most successful tactic employed to date is attacks against the national economic infrastructure. Also significant is the successful targeting of small outposts and the ambushing of convoys and patrols. Substantial armaments have been captured by the guerrillas, and government personnel losses have climbed, particularly during the last quarter of 1982.

(S/NOFORN) In general, insurgent activity during 1982 was marked by the following: January-March saw a marshaling of strength and the failure to disrupt the elections; April-June was largely an inactive period as the guerrillas sought to recover and reassess their position; during June-July the insurgents launched sizable attacks in the departments of Chalatenango and Morazan; from July-September the situation was characterized by the usual frequent attacks on small outposts and economic targets with occasional surges; and October-December saw the advent of a coordinated two-area offensive within guerrilla strongholds.

(S/NOFORN) The trend of the future will probably be more of the same with particular emphasis in three areas: Attacks on the economy -- this aspect of the war has been quite successful and is very cost effective in terms of personnel and materiel; attempts to attack and seize population centers, particularly in the more remote areas -- this gains extensive media coverage and forces the military to wage costly campaigns to dislodge the guerrillas; spectacular sabotage or daring attacks -- destruction of a major bridge in 1981 and a number of aircraft in a sapper raid in 1982 received extensive news media coverage and greatly embarrassed the Armed Forces, demonstrating both a guerrilla strength and a government weakness.

(S/NOFORN) Attacks against a departmental capital, an important military garrison, or significant economic targets such as the oil refining and storage facilities at Acajutla or La Union, the geothermal plant at Ahuachapan, or the power-generating facilities at the Cerron Grande and 5 November dams would exemplify continuation of such a strategy in 1983.

(S/NOFORN) Despite these demonstrated capabilities, the guerrillas have not succeeded in reestablishing the strong urban position or political cadre that characterized the late 1970s. This can be largely attributed to a general decline in popular support for the insurgents.

External Support to the Insurgents

(S [REDACTED]) Third-country assistance to the guerrillas is channeled primarily through Cuba and Nicaragua via air, sea, and land routes. Actual method of delivery is dependent upon insurgent needs, type and quantity of supplies, and accessibility to routes. Honduran military pressure has limited the use of land routes to relatively small deliveries. Increased patrolling by Salvadoran naval units may have complicated maritime deliveries, but recent discoveries of caches in coastal areas indicate sea deliveries are continuing. Sightings of unidentified aircraft have increased dramatically in recent months with reports of helicopters

and other aircraft varying from small single-engine aircraft to C-47s entering Salvadoran airspace and proceeding toward remote and guerrilla-controlled areas.

Guerrilla Casualties

(S [REDACTED]/NOFORN) There is little else but official government figures and press reports on which to base estimates of guerrilla casualties. The evidence is confusing, showing ranges both above and below government figures. The Salvadoran insurgents characteristically evacuate as many of their dead and wounded as possible when withdrawing from an area of conflict. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The propaganda broadcasts via guerrilla mouthpiece Radio Venceremos naturally understate guerrilla casualties. US Embassy reports indicate the insurgents suffered 3,394 dead during 1982. It is noteworthy that the quantities of weapons reported recovered by government forces through clashes with insurgent groups are quite small, indicating either a high percentage of guerrilla supporters and followers among those killed or, more likely, determined insurgent efforts to recover weapons from their fallen comrades. In the matter of prisoners, guerrilla forces frequently take prisoners but subsequently release them, often via the International Red Cross. During their time as POWs, these people are normally well treated, and they have often been the targets of ideological proselytizing.

Government Trends and Capabilities

(S/NOFORN) The military capability of the Salvadoran Armed Forces and Public Security Corps continued to improve throughout 1982. So long as significant levels of foreign aid are available, improvement in a number of areas can be expected.

(S) Some improvement in military strength has occurred. The Army continued to expand during 1982. In 1979, it consisted of some 7,000 personnel. There are now approximately 30,000 troops. In addition to three-US trained quick-reaction battalions created in 1982, two "light" battalions (Venezuelan trained) and a 110-man naval special operations unit with an integral 75-man naval commando company were added to the order of battle. Future force development calls for five additional infantry-type battalions to be established by 1986. Also, 1982 brought implementation of a secure communications network for command and control enhancement. Operational planning demonstrated some departures from traditional hammer-and-anvil tactics to more innovative operations taking advantage of El Salvador's limited air-mobile capability. Operations security, albeit rudimentary, began to be a factor. Greater emphasis was placed on planning security and deception to confuse the insurgents as to the true intent of operations being initiated.

(S) The Salvadoran Air Force is the most combat experienced in Central America. The June 1982 acquisition of six A-37B (Dragonfly) close-support aircraft and four OV-2A (Skymaster) push/pull FAC aircraft has created an effective combat team that has clearly enhanced military capabilities, especially in support-related missions. The Air Force's small operationally available fleet of 19 UH-1H

(Iroquois) helicopters is also of critical importance. Much of the capability and credibility of the strategic reserve (the three quick-reaction battalions, the airborne battalion, cavalry regiment, long-range reconnaissance patrols/LRRPs) is wedded to the UH-1Hs and heavily dependent upon their continued effective operation and availability.

(S) In general, the rapid expansion of the Armed Forces has placed a heavy burden on the government in terms of housing, feeding, equipment, and spare parts. The logistic tail remains weak and directly affects the ability of the Army to conduct sustained operations.

(S) Among the most significant considerations is the fact that the Armed Forces is confronted with a number of missions that have served to dissipate its strength. The Ministry of Defense and Public Security is essentially tasked with fighting the insurgents, guarding key population centers, and protecting key economic/transportation assets. The practical effect of these three basic mission requirements and other attendant duties is to reduce the actual number of troops available for combat. In general, overall force levels are inadequate to accomplish all of these missions.

(S) Another longstanding problem facing the Army has been a shortage of officers, especially at the company grade level. Despite a rather ambitious effort by the US to train 450 officer candidates, the reality of Salvadoran Army politics and the role of the Military Academy within the institution precluded early effective employment of these young officers. While the new US-trained officers have proven themselves and are now integrated into all units, officer shortages remain.

(S/NOFORN) Problems remain in logistics, communications, C2, and intelligence although generally the situation has improved. Command and control remains largely a function of the competence of the commanders involved. The general staff does not engage in contingency or long-range planning. There is no effective intelligence structure to ensure timely reporting or verification. Many commanders retain a garrison mentality and fail to train and conduct small-unit tactics, night operations, and patrolling. Also lacking is an appreciation for and utilization of the news media, psychological operations, and civic action programs. Of significance is the progress the military has made in husbanding its resources and selectively reacting in the face of guerrilla initiatives. This became especially evident after the events of June 1982, when the Army was drawn into a well-planned ERP trap in northern Morazan Department. The piecemeal deployment of units resulted in heavy casualties and a breakdown in command, control, and communications. Since that time, the military has displayed more discretion in the use of its resources and has sought to act against the insurgents at the time and place of its own choosing, rather than reacting to guerrilla initiatives.

(S) Finally, concerning the utilization of US equipment and training, the most positive example of US training efforts consists of the three quick-reaction battalions. These units are acknowledged by the Salvadoran military and the

guerrillas alike as being substantially better than the other line units. However, the lack of a national campaign plan, the rapid expansion of the Armed Forces, a shortage of trained officers at the company, brigade, and battalion staff levels, superimposed on the daily operational requirements, continue to hamper the effective integration and use of US-provided equipment and training.

Government Casualties

(S [REDACTED]) Information available on El Salvadoran Armed Forces casualties is primarily drawn from government sources and guerrilla propaganda radio broadcasts. Other sources have shown the government numbers to be relatively accurate. According to official government data, there were 1,150 killed and 2,387 wounded in 1982. These numbers include officers and enlisted personnel in the Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, National Police, Treasury Police, Municipal Police, Customs Police, and Territorial Service.

(C/NOFORN) Guerrilla claims of Armed Force casualties via Radio Venceremos run much higher, sometimes as much as double official statements. For obvious propaganda purposes, they are probably substantially inflated.

(S [REDACTED]) Government claims of guerrilla casualties rarely include figures for wounded. When these are cited, they are usually much less than those listed as killed, indicating the military continues to dedicate little importance to the taking of prisoners. However, according to late reporting, this practice is changing.

(S) The Salvadoran Armed Forces are faced with a variety of institutional and external threats. While there has been genuine improvement, the military situation is still a stand-off. Fundamental political and economic issues remain unaddressed. These problems are integrally linked to military success. There is also some question about the capability of the Salvadoran military to significantly increase its force structure beyond the present level. There is little doubt, however, that the presently available resources and assets are not being sufficiently utilized.

Outlook

(S/NOFORN) The civil war in El Salvador will continue, and neither the government nor guerrilla forces is likely to prevail decisively in 1983. The insurgents will remain capable of overrunning and temporarily holding isolated towns and outposts as well as conducting spectacular sabotage operations and cumulatively erosive attacks on the country's economic infrastructure. Such operations will be undertaken for their propaganda and psychological value in addition to their military significance. However, the guerrillas lack adequate logistical depth and popular support for a sustained offensive and appear to have discounted the possibility of a near-term victory through insurrection. Instead, they will most likely emphasize popular, prolonged-war tactics designed to conserve their forces while wearing down those of the government.

(S/NOFORN) The guerrillas' October offensive, which included the seizure of remote towns in the northern departments of Morazan and Chalatenango, demonstrated renewed ability to coordinate operations, but current unity problems will also probably continue to have an adverse impact on future campaigns. The guerrillas will remain dependent on outside support from Cuba, Nicaragua, and other Communist or radical states. International economic difficulties may limit financial resources available to the guerrillas, but stocks of arms are expected to remain adequate for over the next year or so for the type of activity expected.

(S/NOFORN) For its part, the Salvadoran military will remain capable of periodic operations against guerrilla base areas to keep the insurgents off balance. However, logistic shortfalls, inadequate mobility, failures in operations/communications security, and the incompetence of some tactical commanders will continue to impede ultimate success. Moreover, the Armed Forces will continue to lack adequate manpower to defend all vulnerable economic targets and isolated outposts while concurrently launching major offensives against the guerrillas. Consequently, the Army and security forces will periodically lose the tactical initiative to the insurgents in selected areas. Having learned from experience the dangers inherent in piecemeal commitment of forces, the military is likely to be less reactive and more methodical in responding to most major guerrilla actions. This probably will reduce military casualties and improve command and control in ensuing operations. However, excessive delay in retaking lost ground would further reduce popular confidence in the government and present the insurgents with psychological victories.

(S/NOFORN) Although the military will suffer periodic setbacks, it is expected to continue to make moderate progress against the guerrillas in the coming year. However, it must demonstrate the continuing will to close with the insurgents and prove that it can provide physical security for the population. Continued progress will also depend on the maintenance of a reasonable degree of political harmony and the willingness of the military to eschew divisive personal rivalries in favor of combating the common enemy. (Classified by DoD Dir S-5200.17 (M-2); declassify on OADR)

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