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LADB Staff

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Jihadists Threaten El Salvador

by LADB Staff

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Unique among countries of the region having sent troops to Iraq in response to the US struggle to mount a coalition, El Salvador renewed its commitment to the project with plans to send another 380 soldiers into the fray.

Nicaragua, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, all followed Spain in retreat from the war upon completion of their initial agreements (see NotiCen, 2004-04-22). In his bid to show that El Salvador deserves its reputation as Latin America's most pro-US country, President Tony Saca has opened the door to attacks from the opposition FMLN, the popular sector, and perhaps international Islamic opposition.

Saca began signaling his intentions in early July, with the comment at an informal meeting with reporters, "I'm seriously thinking of giving approval for sending this third contingent to Iraq." The stated intention at that time was to send the troops to Najaf, considered a safe place to keep the soldiers out of harm's way, but which since has exploded into serious warfare. "I have asked the minister [of defense, Otto Romero] several things, that more (military) people go for civil operations, that we look for a more tranquil city, knowing that we are in a country that is still very dangerous." He said it seemed illogical not to leave forces there just at the point where the Iraqi government was beginning to establish itself and enforce law.

Seeking more secure environs

Romero agreed with the reasoning: "The high command has discussed it, and we have come to the conclusion that a third contingent is necessary, both for the international situation, and for Iraq," he said. The only change was the location; El Salvador's soldiers would go to Diwaniya, a south central city that had not seen much action since May, when US forces wiped out insurgents there. But fierce fighting erupted there again on August 11, and now indications are that Najaf is back on the itinerary as a stopover.

Battalion Chief Hugo Orellana Calidonio, who heads the Cuscatlan II force in Najaf told a Prensa Grafica reporter that his troops are eager to be replaced by the next deployment, Cuscatlan III due to arrive in Najaf August 21. "We already have prepared the installation where they are going to stay. After the transfer of troops they will be settled here and once conditions are right, they will leave for Hilla," he said. Hilla is about 100 km north of the besieged Najaf. Orellana held to the line promoted back in El Salvador that the troops would be used to "construct" and "build," and declined to elaborate on duties.

Soldier safety and the use of troops for humanitarian rather than combat purposes was essential to the selling of the deployment to the Salvadoran people when former President Francisco Flores

initially signed onto it after agreeing to join a force led by Spain, when Jose Maria Aznar was president and a right-wing government ruled the Iberian Kingdom (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18).

Changing the story

Now that humanitarian aid and the hope of contributing to the building of a democratic Iraq is somewhat less certain, the political basis of the deployment has shifted, but opposition is no less intense. The opposition is now ominously international. Internally, the leftist Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) remains opposed to another deployment, and maintains that the executive decree that permitted the first two has expired. They claim the reason for the new deployment is that it is a play by Sacca to secure Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadoran citizen-cash-cows in the US.

Remittances from the US continue to be a mushrooming mainstay for the economy. Sacca denied the allegation, saying, "We have received the petition from the Iraqi government. Now Iraq is being governed by Iraqis, and they have asked that the multinational force stay, while they gain control of the situation of the country." A perilous decision Those arguments faded to black, however, when threats from afar began to appear on the Internet. A purported radical Islamic group promised violent reprisals within the country if El Salvador does not retire its troops from Iraq. The veracity of the threats, and their provenance were unconfirmed, but immigration authorities sprang into defensive action with heightened vigilance of tourists from countries that might have links to these groups. They expelled five tourists who had come to a San Salvador casino from Guatemala.

Minister of Government Rene Figueroa told the media the foreigners were "Arab, Israeli, and Jordanian citizens who had entered illegally to play at a Salvadoran casino. They were immediately detained, all their data was taken, and they were expelled to Guatemala, because they have residency there. They alleged they had businesses there. But we have all their documents." Figueroa also said his people were on the trail of two Saudis in the country for reasons unknown. "We are verifying all entries and movements, especially of [people from] those countries that don't very traditionally visit El Salvador. We can say that all our points of defense and protection for the citizenry are activated."

Activated but flying blind

Figueroa acknowledged that the measures were undertaken in the absence of evidence that the threats were genuine. "We are scrutinizing up to the latest information that falls into our hands; we solicited help from international intelligence and security agencies." These include Central American, US, and European organizations, as well as all domestic police, intelligence, and migration personnel. There is some evidence that the threats, from groups like the Mohamed Al Qaeda Yihad Brigade, are agitating the populace, even as there has been no verification of the origin of the threats.

There have been no polls, but a typical response to media street queries is that of a 40 year-old engineer, who believes the threats are real: "It's not our war; it's the gringos' and I don't understand

why our country has to get involved and send soldiers," said the respondent whose name was not given.

A shaken Islamic Salvadoran community issued a statement pledging support "of our country, and not to act against it. We are a peaceful community, we reject all violence and accept our brothers and sisters of other religions and races, with affection and tolerance." Of Palestinian descent, Saca is nominally a member of that community. Figueroa said the government continues to seek confirmation that the threats are real.

On August 12, he said, without making claims of authenticity, that a threat received that day from the Jammāt al-Tawhīd al-Islamiya group had been traced to Dubai. The threat read, "If you send troops to Iraq we will not be merciful, and we will not abstain from responding, and your destiny will be in hell. We counsel the Salvadoran people not to send your sons to Iraq, because we only understand the language of cars equipped with bombs of blood. This is only one of the various messages we have sent to the countries that have sent troops to Iraq" The Figueroa response came the same day the FMLN chose to rally a street demonstration in front of the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) building against the deployment. FMLN deputies called upon the congreso to halt the August 17 departure.

Civil society groups, while stressing the lack of confirmation of authenticity of the threats simultaneously warned that, "What is happening here in El Salvador, about the danger of attack, will be uniquely and exclusively [the responsibility] of the government of President Antonio Saca," in the words of one representative. Protestors marched again on August 16, this time organized by the Movimiento Popular de Resistencia 12 de Octubre (MPR-12), and joined by campesino, student, women's, union, and FMLN groups. They shared the day with the arrival of another Internet message, this time giving El Salvador 20 days to retire its troops from Iraq. Failure to do so would result in attacks not only within El Salvador, but also upon the troops in Najaf. It would be the last message, "after which there will be no more declarations, only the spilling of blood."

At the demonstration, General Coordinator of the FLMN Salvador Sanchez Ceren said, "We hope the government and President Antonio Saca, who has said he is going to make a government of accord, listens to the people." He added the view that "the war in Iraq is of occupation, there is no process of reconstruction, so there's no reason to be there. It is a war in which the Salvadoran people have nothing to gain. It is for the oil."

MPR-12 director Pedro Hernandez said the deployment and resulting threats "have put the Salvadoran people in a vulnerable situation, of anxiety and uncertainty as a result of an erroneous foreign policy of the government." A hitch and an accusation The following day, August 17, was to be D-day for Cuscatlan III. But at the last minute Saca called the trip off, presumably for just hours. He told the press by phone from the US, where he was meeting with Salvadoran business leaders living in that country. "We have spoken with the Minister of Defense, and there were some logistical questions to complete... departure could be August 19." He meant to leave no doubt. "The troops will leave in the coming days depending on international traffic that we might have available. But the troops will leave."

Saca also used the call to make a circumlocutory inference that the threats were of FMLN origin. "It seems to us a very strange coincidence the fact that the calls for the troops not to leave come exactly from the FMLN political party that makes marches in the streets for the troops not to leave. It seems to me very strange the appearance of these communications [coincident] with the calls that the people of the left make locally who usually have not wanted to help us in the fight against terrorism."

Meanwhile, in a last ditch attempt at forestalling the departure, a private citizen, Jose Francisco Garcia, filed suit with the Corte Suprema against the president and against the defense minister alleging violation of right to life of the soldiers and the population in the face of the mayhem that would ensue if the threats were realized. The suit also alleges that the special law passed by the AL permitting the deployment violates the Constitution because the constitutional mission of the Fuerza Armada is to maintain sovereignty and protect the national territory, neither of which conditions obtain.

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