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El Salvador Sends More Troops To Iraq Amid Public Disapproval

by Mike Leffert

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With a good deal of fanfare and against public sentiment, El Salvador's President Antonio Saca sent off another 380 of his nation's soldiers to fight the US's war in Iraq. On Jan. 29, he stood before his soldiers at the Brigada de Artilleria in San Juan Opico and told them, "We identify ourselves with liberty, we identify ourselves with the United States, we are partners, we are allies, and, of course, a great part of this decision has to do with the belief that we are making a great contribution toward creating peace in Iraq."

Saca continued on to say that he and the country also identify with the war on terror, struggling to make the case that El Salvador, too, suffered terrorism in its own civil war (1980-1992). "It is a delicate job, it is a difficult job, it risks lives, but it is the only way to defend freedom," he said. El Salvador is the lone Latin American country sending troops to Iraq and has been doing so in rotating contingents since August 2003. This will be the eighth such deployment.

In the beginning, the Salvadorans were joined by similar contingents from Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic, but those countries eventually thought better of the adventure and pulled out (see NotiCen, 2004-03-18). Guatemala was about to send troops, too, but never did, presumably because President Oscar Berger got a thumbs-down from his own Army, which he is loath to cross.

This most recent deployment found Saca denying accusations that he was sending soldiers in return for favorable treatment from the US on Temporary Protection Status (TPS) for the thousands of Salvadorans now living and working in the US. A total of 250,000 of them are said to benefit from TPS, and the country is dependent on the money they, and perhaps millions more, send home in remittances. Saca has denied the charge, saying, "Before sending the Cuscatlan battalions to Iraqi soil, we already had TPS, one thing has nothing to do with the other." It is also true, however, that the current TPS agreement expires in September 2007.

A first wave of 87 of the total 380 left for Iraq Jan. 30, on an aircraft provided by the US-led coalition. Minister of Defense Otto Romero said they were headed for Camp Delta in the city of Al Kut, 60 km southeast of Baghdad, where the 379 soldiers of the seventh contingent, which is rotating home, is billeted.

As a side note, the troop deployment came along with a change at the top of the US Embassy, where, on Jan. 27, Charles Louis Glazer presented his credentials to replace Douglas Barclay as US ambassador to El Salvador. This, too, was a normal rotation.

In sending the troops, Saca satisfied the wishes of the US government ahead of those of his own people. A recent newspaper poll put opposition to El Salvador's involvement in Iraq at 81%. Defenders of the deployment policy lean heavily on its humanitarian nature, contending that the Salvadorans build roads, clinics, and schools and that this activity has gone a long way toward rehabilitating the Army's image for brutality, earned during the civil war, gaining it a new image as a respected institution.

"The gringo's war"

For those who suffered during that war, however, it is a different story. "It's the gringo's war," Olga Serrano told The New York Times. "What are we doing over there?" Serrano is a former guerrilla fighter and current executive secretary of the Asociacion de Lisiados de Guerra de El Salvador (ALGES). She spends her days advocating for the war wounded, who despite clearly spelled-out legislation have gotten little of the benefits to which they are entitled. Some months ago, Serrano detailed for Inter Press Service the shoddy treatment these veterans have gotten from the government, and apparently now she has little hope that these new vets will fare much better.

"Our Army should be at home," said Herminia Ramos. She told the Times she had known nothing about the Iraq war until 2004, when officers came to her house to tell her that her son, Natividad, age 20, had become the first Salvadoran to die in it. "I got through our war without losing any family, and now my son was sent to fight in someone else's war."

Each time the government sends another contingent, authorization in the Congress follows the same pattern the left against, the right in favor. This has been the case since President Francisco Flores sent the first wave over the objection of ex-guerrilla and subsequent leader of Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) Shafik Handal.

The FMLN, prior to the peace, was the guerrilla force. Officials of the government and other right-wing parties are more prone than is Saca to admit the tit-for-tat nature of their relationship with the US and the benefits that have flowed from the sacrifice of their troops. Carlos Herrarte of the Partido Democrata Cristiana (PDC) admitted, "We're doing this to help Iraqis, but we're also doing this for our own people. The president can't say that, but that's why we're doing it." The former colonel noted that Salvadorans in the US were getting good treatment from the government even with the anti-immigrant turn the country has taken. He counted as another benefit the US\$461 million in anti-poverty aid the country has gotten from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). "When I go to my town," he said, "they yell. They want to know why we are there. They say, 'Get them out.' Then I start explaining how this is helping our people in the United States."

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