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Summary Of Administration & Critics' Views On Salvadoran Counter-insurgency Program

by Deborah Tyroler

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After seven years, the war in El Salvador remains at an impasse. Even US government analysts agree that neither side can foresee victory in the near future. Because of the nature of guerrilla warfare, the battleground is shifting from the military to the political. Civilian support such as food, shelter, logistical aid, and intelligence is essential for the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). Even where they do not enjoy active support, the rebels rely on public unwillingness to cooperate with government forces. To win the war, the Salvadoran armed forces must neutralize civilian support for the insurgents and win backing for their own efforts to defeat the guerrillas. In 1986 the Salvadoran armed forces launched a major campaign called "United to Reconstruct." The campaign plan calls for military operations to drive remaining guerrilla forces out of selected priority areas, followed by intensive propaganda and civilian efforts to restore government services, regenerate private enterprise, and initiate a variety of assistance programs. The military hopes that these activities will convince the civilian population to turn away from the rebels, and pledge their loyalty to the government forces. Civilian defense patrols are organized by the armed forces to repel guerrilla efforts to penetrate the area. In other strategic areas the military removes the civilian population from the area to isolate the guerrillas from their bases of support. This military strategy has been advocated strongly by US military advisers in El Salvador and endorsed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID resources have been used for numerous projects and activities related to the United to Reconstruct campaign and its predecessor, the National Plan. The Reagan administration's stated objective in supporting and directing the United for Reconstruction counterinsurgency campaign is the defeat of the FMLN guerrillas by reducing them to a terrorist band. USAID funded projects and activities, according to the administration, are intended to restore basic services, strengthen local government, and encourage transfer of leadership from military to civilian authorities. Guerrilla attacks on economic infrastructure are emphasized and contrasted with what is described as "constructive" efforts by the government to reestablish basic services and initiate assistance projects. Thus, the guerrillas are portrayed as responsible for prolonging the war. The administration maintains that coordination with the military is necessary under the circumstances to prevent guerrilla attacks on restored services and programs. Critics of administration policy argue that previous attempts in using this strategy in El Salvador have failed for a variety of reasons. The military was unable to keep the guerrillas out of the area, civilians refused to participate in civil patrols, and government agencies were unable to effectively restore services and carry out assistance programs. The battle for political allegiance also has led to attacks by one side on those suspected of collaborating with the other. Next, the critics maintain that funding a military-sponsored plan whose objective is the defeat of an armed insurgency is a misuse of development aid and Economic Support Funds (ESF). A genuine development process requires active participation by the poor in decisions affecting their lives. Such participation should increase their ability to secure their basic needs and, in the words of the US Foreign Assistance Act, "lead lives of decency, dignity, and hope." While assistance programs may fall short of these objectives in practice, they nevertheless remain the goals of the US development

program. Enlisting development aid in efforts to achieve a military victory is a perversion of such aid. By law, ESF is to be furnished to promote economic or political stability. Its use to prolong a stalemated war results in a superficial stability that relies almost entirely on the continuation of large infusions of US aid. Tremendous political and economic instability persists in El Salvador despite large sums of ESF aid over the past six years. The campaign strategy calls for coordination and incorporation of all activities into a united effort against the guerrillas. Independent agencies and programs are considered suspect by the government forces. Many private aid providers have experienced repeated harassment and persecution. (From April 1987 reports by the Coalition for a New Foreign Policy, Washington, DC.)

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