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## Civil Strife, Death Squad Activities Return To El Salvador

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

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Since late May, San Salvador has witnessed an outbreak in civil strife, reminiscent of the early 1980s when street fighting and death squad murders were everyday events. Rebel sabotage actions, anti-US protests and mysterious attacks on leftist groups have been taking place simultaneously. On May 28 at noon, a bomb blew off part of the roof of the offices of Comadres, a leftist committee of relatives of disappeared persons. Two employees were slightly injured. The same day two dozen refugees occupied the city cathedral, demanding government permission to return to live in their home villages. On May 29 about 100 refugees and Comadres members staged a raucous protest outside the US Embassy, accusing the United States of encouraging the bombing. Hurling a barrage of rocks and at least one burning torch into the compound, they covered the embassy's looming concrete walls with graffiti. The next day, witnesses said, two trucks of unidentified riflemen pulled up to the office of the Nongovernmental Human Rights Commission, an independent group sympathetic to the rebels. After threatening to shoot the activists inside, the gunmen sped away when reporters arrived. A well-known teachers' union leader, Julio Cesar Portillo, was shot in the back at a demonstration May 31 at the gates of Mariona penitentiary where political prisoners are held. Union members charged he was shot by prison guards. The police countered that the bullets had come from within the crowd of protesters. May 31 was also the start of a three-day traffic halt ordered by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. The action was intended to counter Duarte's decision to move the entire legislative assembly to the rural town of Sensuntepeque on June 1 to hear his speech marking his third anniversary as president. Duarte's 80-vehicle convoy traveled to the countryside without coming under rebel attack. But in San Salvador guerrillas burned at least 10 buses in three days and set off countless small bombs, bringing back the black smoke of incendiary bombs and the rattle of explosions to city streets for the first time in two years. Public transportation was paralyzed in the city for most of the three days. Electricity was off all day throughout the first week of June, as rebel attacks on the power grid worsened a hydroelectric shortage due to a prolonged drought. Phones were intermittent; many homes were without water. Darkened streetlights led to tangled knots of traffic and ugly confrontations among drivers. As of June 16, leaders of student and trade union organizations continued to receive threats from death squads. The latter are reportedly demanding that rebel "collaborators" leave the country "or else." On June 15, hundreds of women, mothers of disappeared persons and political prisoners, demonstrated outside the army chief of staff headquarters, demanding to know the whereabouts of 35 civilians who were arrested or kidnapped by the army. President Jose Napoleon Duarte's refusal to discuss rebel proposals for "humanizing the war" presented last month is considered by many Salvadorans as yet another reason for criticizing the government. According to the independent Salvadoran Human Rights Commission, the government's insistence that the rebels must first disarm before participating in peace talks is not only unacceptable to the rebels but to the majority of the Salvadoran people, who see no end in sight to the seven-year-old civil war. Duarte's request to postpone the Central American summit scheduled for late June in Guatemala, said Commission spokespersons, is perceived as "open complicity" with the Reagan administration's preference of military victory over diplomatic efforts toward solving problems in the region. A range of Salvadoran editorial writers and foreign diplomats noted that the rebel proposals would

have brought relief to civilians who have suffered for years in the war. Duarte has reportedly met recently with contra leaders, and US Asst. Secretary of Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams is scheduled to meet in the near future with Duarte in San Salvador. According to Salvadoran and foreign diplomats alike, the president has a long way to go to generate sufficient enthusiasm for his government to make a good showing in the March 1988 national elections. On June 13, PRENSA LATINA reported that a top army officer with links to the country's right-wing business community, may be a candidate for the presidency in 1988. Col. Sigfrido Ochoa Perez, former commander of the Fourth Infantry Brigade based in Chalatenango department, has resigned. Ochoa Perez is one of El Salvador's most widely known field officers, and is an outspoken critic of the Christian Democrat government. According to the Salvadoran media, his association with the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and ultra-rightwinger Roberto D'Aubuisson is well known. (Basic data from several reports by PRENSA LATINA, EXCELSIOR; WASHINGTON POST 06/06/87)

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