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El Salvador: Military Launches New Program To Win "hearts" Of Civilians

by Deborah Tyroler

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At a news conference on Aug. 3 in the northeastern village of Perquin, Col. Rene Emilio Ponce announced that the Salvadoran military is launching a civic action campaign in guerrilla territory to win the "hearts" of civilians. Ponce is expected to assume command of the Salvadoran armed forces this fall. Ponce promised to be more generous than the guerrillas in a speech to residents in San Antonio, a nearby village. He was informed of the villagers' needs, including medicine, assistance in obtaining electric light and sports equipment, and for constructing a bridge and a well. Before leaving in a helicopter, he said, "The next time I return, I hope I have better news about water and lights." Ponce added that he did not believe he could respond to requests on a new bridge. Ponce said the campaign which includes increased counterinsurgency night patrols was designed and launched without help from US advisers. He informally called it "United to Work" to distinguish it from a 1986 program called "United to Rebuild." The latter reportedly collapsed when President Jose Napoleon Duarte's government failed to cooperate. The colonel said, "We know we won't win the war with rifles and bullets. We want to convert our military successes into political successes that will be more lasting." He acknowledged that his men did not receive a warm reception. Residents avoided the heavily armed soldiers, and Perquin's streets were deserted. The five factions of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) have emphasized efforts to build popular support, such as in the northwestern department of Chalatenango. For years, the Popular Liberation Forces has controlled the highlands around Perquin, located about 130 miles northeast of San Salvador. According to a study released four months ago by four US Army lieutenant colonels attending the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the rebels can sustain their current strategy "indefinitely," and the Salvadoran government has "yet to devise a persuasive formula for winning the war." (Basic data from New York Times, 08/05/88)

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