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Analysis: Government & Rebels Raising The Stakes In El Salvador

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The article below by Bob Ostertag was distributed by the Pacific News Service during the week of Sept. 26-Oct. 2. Ostertag has reported from El Salvador since the mid-1980s. (The LADB has received reproduction authorization from PNS.)] Sitting in an abandoned churchyard of the tiny hamlet of San Francisco, Rosa Emilia Rivas gestures to the cornfield a few yards away where her brother and six other peasants killed by government soldiers last week now lie buried. Two small heaps of dirt no crosses, not even a stone mark their graves. "We didn't have money for a Mass," she tells visitors who have come to investigate the killings. The army's alleged massacre is only the latest sign that the eight-year-old civil war here is picking up in intensity. Since early September a string of guerrilla military actions has prompted speculation that the rebels are about to begin their long-promised offensive. Government forces, for their part, have clamped down hard on dissent attacking student demonstrators, raiding leftist labor unions, rounding up village suspects. The escalation began two weeks ago with a guerrilla assault on a major government garrison in the north, coordinated with smaller actions in the east. State security forces struck back at student demonstrators in San Salvador and Santa Ana, using clubs, tear gas, and ammunition. Rebels responded to the attacks by calling for a national traffic stoppage, while security forces launched raids on the offices of leftist unions. The following week, rebel forces assaulted troops defending a communications center near the border with Honduras, and continued their relentless campaign of sabotaging the country's electrical system. The army claims those killed in San Francisco were involved in the sabotage. For both sides, however, the key is not military success but the political impact their actions will have on a population both wary and weary of a war that has killed over 70,000. According to rebel documents the army claims to have seized, the rebels hope their military actions will spur more active opposition to the regime in the urban areas, and ultimately lead to an insurrection which would break the stalemate in the countryside. The army is well aware of these plans, and is determined to put a brake on urban agitators whose marches have become increasingly militant and at times violent. A new group of hardline officers was promoted to top command positions last June, and the troops involved in curbing the student marches and in the San Francisco shootings are under their command. "This is a call to the people for the anarchy to cease," said a top army official in reference to the arrest of the students. It is not clear, however, that the rebel actions are having their intended effect. In part this may be due to errors of judgment by the guerrillas. The transportation stoppage, for example, was supposed to be seen as a response to the government's crackdown on the students. Throughout the three-day stoppage, the rebels' mountain-based radio transmitter described the action as a response of a "people's army" defending the right of the population to demonstrate in the streets. In fact, however, the rebels' threats to destroy any commercial traffic that violated their ban gave the army a golden opportunity to protect civilians from the guerrillas. El Salvador is in the midst of a severe economic crisis, and the loss of three days' wages due to the lack of public transportation can have a severe impact on working-class families. Public opinion polls have shown the traffic bans to be extremely unpopular. In addition, for the rebels to achieve the widespread political agitation they desire, they must first overcome what one

academic analyst calls the "logic of survival," which much of the population has adopted in the face of so many years of violence and horror. This "logic of survival" has long been a fundamental fact of life in the countryside, where isolated peasants frequently offer token collaboration to whichever armed group is in the area. But the same phenomenon is now becoming increasingly apparent in the cities, as the left attempts to rebuild its urban base. As a union march passed through the teeming central market here last week, the simple cartoon pamphlets distributed by the marchers were eagerly snatched up by the women and children who populate the market's tiny stalls. Sitting amid the piles of simple wares, with babies at their breasts and stray chickens at their feet, women with rudimentary reading skills attempted to explain the cartoons to others. Yet behind the march came a large contingent of anti-riot police replete with a sound truck denouncing the unions as rebel front groups at ear-splitting volume. At the authorities' instructions, the market children scampered around helping the police tear down the banners and posters the marchers had left behind moments before. Rebels claim that such incidents are merely a facade that clandestine rebel networks will show themselves at the proper time. That may or may not be, but the look one sees on most people's faces here is that of the raw struggle to survive.

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