

10-28-1988

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Recommended Citation

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More On Salvadoran Rebel Leaders' Diplomatic Tour

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, October 28, 1988

On Oct. 24, the two most powerful leaders of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), Cmdrs. Joaquin Villalobos and Leonel Gonzalez, met with Costa Rican President Oscar Arias for three hours in San Jose. The stop in Costa Rica was described as the most important in a diplomatic tour of several nations (including Argentina, Uruguay, Peru, and Ecuador) keynote in the rebels' diplomatic offensive to rally support in the region. (See CAU 10/26/88.) Villalobos and Gonzalez said they were seeking to deliver a message to Latin America that the FMLN was ready for serious negotiations and could be trusted to fulfill promises of maintaining a mixed economy and pluralistic democracy should it gain a share of power. Sources close to the FMLN said the trip was also designed to provide the commanders with a chance to see how the outside world views El Salvador. The FMLN, a coalition of five groups, has been fighting the Salvadoran government for nine years. It is recognized as one of the most resilient guerrilla forces in Latin America, and also has a history of bloody internal purges. Villalobos, 37, a former economics student, is leader of the People's Revolutionary Army. Gonzalez, 44, whose real name is Salvador Sanchez Sereno, is a former elementary school teacher, and commands the Popular Liberation Forces. Villalobos' Army is generally perceived as the FMLN's most effective fighting force and its most hard-line faction. During an interview in March, Villalobos strongly defended insurrection. In San Jose this week he said the strategy was "a point of debate." As evidence of their ability to work with different groups, the commanders cited the return of their unarmed political allies, the Democratic Revolutionary Front, to El Salvador. That front and another social democratic party formed the Democratic Convergence, nominating Guillermo Manuel Ungo as its presidential candidate for the March 1989 presidential elections. Since returning to El Salvador a year ago, the politicians have criticized their FMLN allies, especially the tactic of setting off car bombs in the capital, and economic sabotage. Many have concluded that the alliance is ending. While acknowledging differences, the commanders praised the politicians as patriots with whom they could work because the Convergence was running on a platform of negotiations to end the war. Statements by Villalobos recorded by the Washington Post (10/26/88) follow: "It is blindness not to see there is a huge social bomb in El Salvador, and moreover there is a detonator" in the FMLN. "This is a difficult moment for the American counterinsurgency project, leading to a time of definition and social explosion. Our role is to try, with Latin America and different social forces, to lower the costs of the explosion (through negotiations) instead of generating greater bloodshed... "We must consider the United States, because we are in its area of influence. We understand that. El Salvador's revolution has the best possibility of being broad, democratic, flexible with a multiplicity of forces. "The Reagan administration has created ghosts, talking about us like Pol Pot (of Cambodia), saying we do not want political parties, we want one party, that there will be religious persecution...[The United States] would try to roll it back, so it is not logical or feasible." (Basic data from Washington Post, 10/26/88)

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