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Deborah Tyroler

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Notes On Salvadoran Rebels' New Military Strategy

by Deborah Tyroler

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As seen in recent urban offensives, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Movement (FMLN) has instituted significant changes in its military strategy. Since rebel attacks in San Salvador began in September, at dusk the city is transformed into a military-occupied war zone. The FMLN's Radio Venceremos has issued warnings to civilians to stay away from military vehicles and installations. On Nov. 30 in a broadcast, the FMLN declared the US Embassy and its personnel military targets. In 1985 the FMLN dissolved its battalions, returned to classic guerrilla warfare tactics and took the war to the cities. These strategy modifications were implemented in response to constant bombing by the Salvadoran Air Force, and the annihilation of its "Clara Elisabeth Ramirez" urban front, which separated from the FMLN general command in 1983. Today's urban commandos are younger persons trained within the last two years, thereby leaving better-armed guerrilla combatants available for large-scale military attacks. Col. Orlando Zepeda, chief of the Infantry Brigade headquartered in San Salvador, who is also responsible for urban counter-insurgency, said that the guerrilla forces were "morally and militarily defeated." However, he also admitted that the effectiveness of their urban front was occupying 65% of all Salvadoran troops in defensive positions. Zepeda also said that 85 to 90% of his brigade is placed on alert during the coffee and sugar harvests. On the volcano, located on the outskirts of San Salvador, where the urban guerrilla combatants reportedly train, the military is constantly on alert status. Zepeda said the military is crippled by limitations placed on it by the government and the US in its desire to portray El Salvador as an effective democracy. In an effort to restrict the free movement of "terrorists," Zepeda has petitioned congresspersons for more counter-insurgency aid and has announced an increase in military reserves and means to exert greater control in urban areas. The Salvadoran military's principal tactics for applying control in urban areas is the elimination of suspects and recruiting the young. Next, the military uses "psychological warfare" in its attempts to discredit the rebels by blaming terrorist attacks on the FMLN-FDR. Some FMLN members believe that the urban front will encourage insurrection and thus make victory more likely. Ignacio Ellacuria, leftist intellectual and rector of the University of Central America (UCA), a Jesuit institution, describes the FMLN's new strategy as very dangerous and not favorable to serious negotiations. (Basic data from a 12/20/88 report by the Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales-CRIES, Managua)

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