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Salvadoran Military Acknowledges Responsibility For Sept. 21 Massacre

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 12, a statement by the Armed Forces Press Committee (COPREFA) said an investigation into the Sept. 21 massacre of 10 peasants demonstrated direct responsibility of Maj. Mauricio Beltran, who was acting as the head of operations for the 5th Infantry Brigade's Jiboa Battalion at the time. COPREFA said that Maj. Beltran, Lt. Arnaldo Vasquez, sergeants Jorge Alberto Guzman and Rafael Rosales, Corp. Hernan Ayala and four privates have been arrested. According to the Committee, during military operations near the village of San Francisco, 50 km. east of the capital, two subordinate officers refused to obey Beltran's order to shoot the peasants. The major then took command of the army units and supervised the killings. Immediately after the massacre, the military said the 10 victims had died in a rebel ambush. Witnesses told human rights groups and journalists that soldiers rounded up village residents and led 10 of them away. Gunfire and grenade explosions were heard and the bodies were found in a nearby ditch. The COPREFA statement acknowledged the peasants' deaths "were not the result of a rebel ambush, as the military personnel involved in the event informed their superiors." The army maintained the villagers were linked to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, and that soldiers had confiscated explosives and rebel literature from them. COPREFA said the slayings constituted a "serious violation of normal operating procedures," under which suspected rebels are to be detained. The army high command absolved the commander of the 5th Brigade, Col. Emilio Chavez, of responsibility for the murders, saying "he was not adequately nor properly informed of the reality of the events." Unnamed "Western diplomats" cited by the New York Times praised the military's decision, but said they doubted the two implicated officers would be convicted. Prosecution of the officers would be unprecedented since the beginning of El Salvador's civil war. In the past nine years, despite evidence of military involvement in thousands of civilian deaths and other human rights violations, no officer has been tried and convicted. A few enlisted men have faced prosecution. Only eight have been convicted of abuses, six of those for killing US citizens. (Basic data from AFP, 03/12/89; New York Times, 03/13/89)

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