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U.S. Officials In El Salvador Say Cuba & Soviet Bloc Countries Upgrading Rebels' Arsenal

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 16 in San Salvador, senior US officials told the New York Times, on the condition that they not be identified, that Cuba and other "Soviet-bloc countries" were providing arms to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) to assist them in escalating the war against the government. The officials said there was a recent influx of large quantities of Soviet-made arms and ammunition, which they said were presumably shipped through Nicaragua. In the past, there have been frequent accusations of Nicaraguan and Cuban aid to the Salvadoran rebels. Evidence has been debatable, at best. US officials displayed several AK-47 rifles, among about 20 captured by the Salvadoran Army in recent weeks. They asserted that the markings on the guns proved they were manufactured in the East bloc. Next, the officials presented recently captured ammunition and shell casings stamped with the numbers 88 and 13. They said those numbers proved that the ammunition was made in 1988 at Cuban Ammunition Loading Factory No. 13. Rebel leaders have told journalists on numerous occasions that they were buying the Soviet-style rifles on the Central American black market, and that many of the weapons indirectly come from the contras, who received many shipments of AK-47s from the US. US officials claim they have traced the markings of the captured guns and that none were part of a contra shipment. The Sandinista army also uses the AK-47. No shipments have been intercepted. Nonetheless, Salvadoran military officers have charged that Nicaragua is shipping the guns. (Basic data from New York Times, 03/17/89)

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