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El Salvador: Notes On Rebel Capabilities

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Since the early 1980s, the size of the rebel force has declined from about 12,000 fighters to an estimated 7,000. According to the New York Times, when rebel military capabilities declined, they stepped up economic sabotage which in turn undermines popular support. The Times cites unidentified senior rebel commanders who acknowledge they have "suffered a series of recent setbacks and that they are struggling to resolve their political and military difficulties." However, the commanders also assert that many government troop units are incompetent, and that repression and political polarization are escalating. As a result, say the commanders, they "are enjoying unparalleled success in recruiting." The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has repeatedly adopted new tactics in the face of army equipment and troop expansion, as well as tactical modifications. In the past year, the FMLN has brought the war to San Salvador for the first time since their urban front was crushed in the early 1980s. The rebels are apparently capable of attacking practically any target in the capital, at any hour of the day or night. Next, for the first time ever, the guerrillas have begun established mobile bases on a volcano that towers over the city. Despite almost constant army patrols, the rebels have built munitions factories on the mountain slopes. The Times said that most military and political analysts agree that the rebel command structure remains superior to army leadership, even after recent improvements. Next, FMLN fighters are more highly motivated than government soldiers, most of whom are forcibly recruited off the streets and paid low wages. In a recent interview in a nearby country senior rebel commander Ana Guadalupe Martinez said the guerrilla command debated in late May whether to continue assassinations. After what she described as a bitter and drawn-out debate, the high command concluded that assassinations were counterproductive. The meetings were the latest in an 18-month series held to devise military strategies that do not simultaneously undermine the rebels' political standing. According to the Times, Martinez indicated that the result of the recent meetings was a decision to wait. The rebels will continue to harass the army while the government is expected to fail to deliver on its economic promises while simultaneously escalating repression. The origins of the civil war extreme income and wealth inequity remain, despite a virtual avalanche of US aid. The FMLN controls about a sixth of the country, and are a shadow government in perhaps a third of Salvadoran territory. (Basic data from New York Times, 07/30/89)

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