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Interview With Salvadoran Rebel Commander Joaquin Villalobos

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a Sept. 17 interview with the New York Times in Mexico City, commander of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) Joaquin Villalobos said that if the US terminated military aid to the Salvadoran government, the rebel forces would be willing to "cease hostilities." He said, "There is no doubt that if this aid ended, the fighting would have to end immediately. To a gesture of this scope, our response would have to be immediate." Villalobos pointed out that a rebel gesture in response to a US aid cutoff is not connected with the Salvadoran government's demand that the rebels disarm. He said, "This war has causes, and the problem is not one of handing over arms but of ending the reasons that have led to taking up arms and maintaining the war." If the war's causes, including the sweeping reform of the military, the political system and judiciary mentioned in the new rebel proposal, were resolved, Villalobos said, there would be no reason for the guerrillas to take up arms. But until such an agreement is reached, he added, rebel disarmament is out of the question. Regarding US policy, Villalobos said, "We had hoped that the change from the Reagan to the Bush Administration would produce more pragmatic positions and attitudes." With a few minor exceptions, he said, "we have not seen anything substantive." Villalobos continued: "Look, they have increased aid to the security organs at a time of a government of the extreme right that includes several persons accused of having used those security organs to persistently violate human rights." In the past year, Villalobos has engaged in diplomatic activity. He said one of the reasons for the more visible profile he has adopted is to end what he called a "propagandistic confrontation" with the US. "My own person has been the object of a campaign saying he is a hard-liner, a radical, a terrorist, he's opposed to any peace dialogue...But I have said on other occasions that we have a greater sense of identification with the United States than with any other nation." In an article published under his name earlier this year in Foreign Policy, Villalobos came out in favor of political and economic pluralism in El Salvador and peaceful coexistence with the US. A rebel strategy paper called "Plan Five" captured by the Salvadoran military last year said, "The Yankees are weakened but not beaten, and will only leave the heart of the continent if they are politically and militarily defeated." According to the Times, the document has been called authentic by the FMLN. The strategy paper refers to negotiations as a means of "keeping the enemy tied to the table with a view to his strategic weakening," and endorses the notion of mass insurrection as a political and military tactic. When asked about the contradiction between the two documents, Villalobos said, "I think you have to differentiate between two things: the objectives hoped to be achieved and the strategy by which they are reached. I don't know much about the history of the United States, but I imagine that at some point during its struggle of independence, the practice of sabotage must have been discussed." The "conditions of war to which we have been submitted have obliged us in certain cases to do this, and in some cases to make mistakes," said the rebel commander. "We have made some errors, we are aware of that." Among those errors, Villalobos said, was the killing nearly 15 years ago of Roque Dalton, a poet and rival rebel leader whose death split the insurgency for many years. Villalobos, who has often been accused of killing Dalton or of ordering the killing, said it was "a collective decision" in which he participated. He said the decision was costly because "it was hard
for us to win back the support of the intellectuals." He defended the FMLN's effort to sabotage the Salvadoran presidential elections in March. Political allies on the left who were participating in the elections asked the FMLN leadership to refrain from an intimidation campaign. "In El Salvador, elections are an act of war, not a political act, as in the United States or Costa Rica," he said. (Basic data from New York Times, 09/18/89)

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