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El Salvador: Relatives Of Political Prisoners & Disappeared Occupy Costa Rican Embassy

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On the morning of Oct. 5, a group of relatives of political prisoners, disappeared and assassinated persons occupied the Costa Rican Embassy and seized 19 hostages to denounce the Salvadoran government's human rights violations. A spokesperson for the group, comprised mainly of women, told AP in an interview that the takeover was undertaken so that the Costa Rican government pressures President Alfredo Cristiani "to end the repression against the people."

The activists who staged the occupation were members of the Federation of Committees of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated People of El Salvador. A spokesperson said they planned to stay at the embassy until their demands were met. For several years, the Federation has protested killings and kidnappings by government security forces and rightist death squads.

Notimex cited the Federation as saying that it had occupied the embassy to request Costa Rica and "other friendly governments of the world" to pressure the US to suspend military aid to El Salvador, and to denounce the Salvadoran government's continuous human rights violations. In addition, the Federation demanded that the government provide information on the whereabouts of a list of prisoners, and disappeared persons. In contrast to reports by Notimex, Salvadoran radio and AFP, stating that the protesters numbered about 50, AP reported a total of 20. Costa Rican Ambassador Jesus Manuel Fernandez, Consul General Humberto Murillo and First Secretary Rene Aldama were being held in the embassy. Most other hostages were people visiting the embassy on business.

Fifteen journalists and five people from the Green Cross, a local first aid group, were also inside the embassy offices, but not considered hostages. Red Cross personnel delivered sandwiches. AP said reports conflicted on whether the activists were armed. The AFP reported that Fernandez was permitted to leave the embassy briefly to speak with reporters. He told journalists that some of the assailants were armed with pistols when they forced their way into the embassy. AP state that reporters said they saw a handgun tucked into the waistband of at least one young man who participated in the occupation. The reporters also said demonstrators carried newspaper-wrapped packets that appeared to have a fuse. The activists' spokesperson, cited by AP, said they had no weapons. A report by Xinhua indicated that the protesters were not armed.

Notimex reported that the Federation activists disarmed guards responsible for security of the Central American Building, before entering the embassy on the third floor of the six-story structure. Special National Police units surrounded the building, but no violence was reported as of late Thursday evening. Two hours after the occupation, an anti-riot squad failed in an attempt to dislodge the protesters. On Thursday afternoon, about 30 people employees of the Peruvian and Swiss embassies, and of the United Nations office in El Salvador were permitted to leave the building. Ambassador Fernandez told AP by telephone that he requested military officers at the scene to lift the cordon around the building. He said his request was under consideration. San Salvador Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas arrived at the embassy shortly after dusk, in an effort to mediate a solution. His presence was requested by the Federation. Fernandez, who has a heart condition, said his medicine had been delivered to him, and that he had been examined by a Red Cross doctor. When informed of the embassy takeover, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias said, "It is very sad that there are people
who believe that violence can be the good instrument to get what they want." He spoke at a news conference in San Jose, Calif., where he was visiting. In San Jose, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Dino Starcevic said, "Shortly after midday, a woman employee at the embassy called us to say that a group of attackers had seized the embassy and taken people hostage, and that they are heavily armed, with rifles and even hand grenades." On Thursday evening, Fernandez said the Federation activists had decided to remain inside the embassy until the next day, and that the Salvadoran government had not yet established contacts or entered into negotiations with them. Salvadoran Information Minister Mauricio Sandoval told reporters the takeover was "an act of provocation" but was being dealt with "calmly, so no one gets hurt." Later, in a communique Sandoval asserted that the occupation of the embassy was a "propagandistic act." He said the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) is responsible for the safety of the hostages, and not the government. According to the minister, the occupation had put the Oct. 16 talks between the government and the rebels in jeopardy. The "dialogue" is to take place in San Jose, Costa Rica. (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, Xinhua, 10/05/89)

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