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Deborah Tyroler

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El Salvador: 46 Rebel Wounded Evacuated To Cuba

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Oct. 7, a group of 46 former combatants of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) who had lost legs, arms or their sight left the Mexican embassy in San Salvador for Cuba via Mexico. The group was transferred to the embassy Oct. 3 after occupying the Roman Catholic Cathedral since Aug. 20 to demand government authorization for their evacuation to foreign countries to seek medical treatment. According to the FMLN, the wounded rebels decided to move to the Mexican embassy as a result of threats from death squads. They were accompanied by three US citizens, embassy personnel and members of the Salvadoran Red Cross during the transfer from the Cathedral to the embassy grounds. Upon arrival at the embassy, the former rebels requested political asylum. On the following day, the Mexican Foreign Ministry issued a communique stating that the wounded were under the protection of the Mexican embassy and had been provided with lodging and medical treatment. Two days after the 46 Salvadorans were moved to the embassy, the Salvadoran National Assembly approved amnesty legislation for 167 severely injured former rebel combatants. The law stipulates that others whose names were not listed could request amnesty within 30 days after the decree goes into effect. The FMLN rejected the government's amnesty, in part because its language describes former rebel combatants as "criminals." According to the FMLN, the government is obligated to authorize evacuation of severely wounded rebels to other countries, as stipulated by the Geneva conventions. The accords apply to treatment of enemy fighters in a context of war. The former rebels were transported to the international airport by the International Red Cross, accompanied by representatives of the Catholic Church, a Mexican embassy official, and the Salvadoran Foreign Ministry. At the airport they boarded a private plane bound for Chetumal, Mexico, enroute to Havana. On Oct. 8, government news agency in Havana, AIN, reported that the former rebels had arrived late Saturday. After initial treatment in Cuba, many of the wounded are to receive sophisticated long-term care in other countries. In his Sunday homily, Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas described the evacuation as a humanitarian victory that will facilitate the departure of war wounded elsewhere in El Salvador. Rivera said legal scholars will have to decide whether the former rebels' departure occurred under terms of a government amnesty program or the right of asylum. He added, "The important issue is that humanitarian motives prevailed." According to Rivera, the departure of 120 former rebel war wounded had been discussed for several months.

"Due to party and power problems," arrangements for their evacuation bogged down in March. The archbishop commented that the amnesty legislation approved by the National Assembly in the past week was sui generis, different in content and intent from such laws elsewhere. An unidentified source close to the embassy told Notimex that the evacuation was not connected to President Alfredo Cristiani's amnesty bill, nor to the right of asylum. The source said the Mexican government arranged the evacuation in terms of "fulfilling humanitarian duties in the strictest sense." Since both the Mexican embassy and the Salvadoran government have refused comment, the precise terms of the evacuation remain unclear. The first evacuation of severely injured or maimed rebel war wounded took place on Sept. 21, 1984. Sixty former combatants were transported to West Germany, Sweden, France, Costa Rica and Cuba for medical treatment. The second occurred on Oct. 24, 1985, in the context of an exchange. President Jose Napoleon Duarte's daughter and a friend, and 23 mayors held by the rebels were turned over to the government. In turn, the government released 26
political prisoners, and permitted the evacuation of 101 former rebel combatants. On Feb. 2, 1987, the FMLN released Col. Omar Napoleon Avalos in exchange for the freedom of 72 persons affiliated with labor unions from government custody, and the evacuation of 39 rebel war wounded. In March 1987, the Salvadoran government, the FMLN diplomatic policy commission, and the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) entered into an agreement to evacuate an unspecified number of rebel war wounded. A similar agreement in June 1987 resulted in the departure of 57 wounded with the assistance of the International Red Cross. The last evacuation occurred on May 4, 1988, when 29 former rebel combatants were flown to Mexico after occupying a church in San Salvador to call attention to their demands. (Basic data from AP, 10/07/89; AFP, Notimex, 10/07/89, 10/08/89; 10/10/89 weekly summary by FMLN's Centro de Documentacion e Investigacion)

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