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Salvadoran Rebels Launch New Offensive

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Oct. 30, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) commandos attacked the Defense Ministry and headquarters of the joint chiefs of staff with homemade mortars, killing at least one person and wounding five. According to witnesses, who spoke with AP on condition of anonymity, the rebels fired eight to 10 mortars from the beds of two trucks parked 300 yards from the military compound. Two of the mortars exploded at a gasoline station, killing an attendant, and wounding two others. Another mortar exploded at a nearby restaurant, causing extensive damage and wounding one person. The witnesses said two others blew up at the entrance of the military compound and three more exploded in a parking lot at a nearby baseball stadium, wounding at least one soldier and one civilian. The military press office issued a statement saying one civilian was killed and at least two injured in the attack. It said one of the injured was a civilian employee who worked in the general staff headquarters of the Armed Forces high command. A military spokesperson, Maj. Mauricio Chavez Caceres, said no bombs fell inside the compound. AP cited an unidentified soldier on duty at the gate who said two landed inside. AFP reported that rebels fired at least 16 shells from homemade mortars, killing one person and wounding at least 15 others.

At a press conference, Col. Rene Emilio Ponce, head of the joint chiefs of staff, said eight shells struck the grounds of the Armed Forces Social Club adjacent to the ministry compound but no one was wounded at the club. The other shells exploded in nearby civilian neighborhoods, he said. Ponce reported 30 unfired shells were found on two trucks from which the other shells had been launched. The colonel called the attack "indiscriminate terrorism," and accused the Nicaraguan government of supplying weapons to the rebels. Next, Ponce said that the military high command had not dismissed the possibility of a state of emergency decree in response to the "situation of continuous violence." He added the government may have to adopt a "measure of force that permits democracy, such as a state of emergency." He told the reporters, "You are going to feel" the new measures. He then added, "Better said, those who are terrorists are going to feel them, not you." At a separate press conference, President Alfredo Cristiani said that a state of emergency was possible. He described the attack as a "terrorist action tending to provoke a breakdown in the dialogue process." According to the president, the attack was aimed at "generating opinion among the armed forces against the dialogue process." He accused the Nicaraguan Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) of either supplying the weapons used in the attack, or parts and technical skill for their construction to the rebels. Cristiani said that his government does not plan to offer new proposals at the Nov. 20 meeting with rebel representatives in Venezuela, but rather to develop its proposals presented in San Jose. [Regarding the Salvadoran government's recent accusations regarding Nicaragua's presumed supply of weapons to the FMLN, in San Jose, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega said: "Every time the Salvadoran army says that it has discovered a weapons cache, it blames Nicaragua, but never presents proof."] On Oct. 31, the FMLN claimed responsibility for the attack on the military compound in a broadcast by Radio Venceremos. The attack, said the radio report, was the beginning of a new military offensive against those opposed to negotiating an end to the civil war. The campaign is called, "Everyone all out against ARENA and the Tandona," or the Nationalist Republican Alliance and top military officers. The broadcast praised the audacity of the guerrillas who mounted the attack on Monday, and claimed the mortar shells had caused
"numerous casualties to officers and troops" and "serious damage" to the installations. Regarding the shells that missed the mark and caused civilian casualties, the rebel said, "We lament that." The FMLN had announced in February it was suspending the use of homemade mortars in populated areas because their inaccuracy caused civilian casualties. Leftist politician Ruben Zamora described the attack as "incorrect" and "condemnable" as a violation of the Geneva Accords. (Basic data from AP, Notimex, 10/30/89, 10/31/89; AFP, 10/31/89)

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