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Salvadoran Rebels Launch Biggest Offensive Since 1981: Summary Of Events & Statements

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On Saturday, Nov. 11, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) commenced its biggest coordinated attack since 1981. The rebel offensive in San Salvador, the nation's capital, is the most extensive ever in 10 years of civil war. The FMLN's label for the offensive is "Febe Elizabeth Lives, the Fascists Must Go." Trade union leader Febe Elizabeth Vazquez was one of 10 persons who died in the Oct. 31 bombing of the FENASTRAS headquarters. The bombing was blamed on the military and government by the FMLN, FENASTRAS and numerous other Salvadoran organizations. Claiming that the government and the armed forces are responsible for an escalation in death squad activities and other violent incidents in recent weeks, the FMLN canceled its participation in a third round of peace talks with the government, scheduled for Nov. 21-22 in Caracas, Venezuela. The rebel high command insisted that until the government of President Alfredo Cristiani issues orders which would guarantee respect for the human and civil rights of Salvadoran labor union and popular organization members, the FMLN could not participate in peace talks. In broadcasts by Radio Venceremos and Radio Farabundo Marti, the FMLN stated that the government had not demonstrated seriousness in the peace talks. Instead, said the FMLN, the government is being directed by the ultra-right and has no intention of arriving at a negotiated political solution to the war. The purpose of the offensive, said the rebels, is to demonstrate what the FMLN can do in hopes that the government will finally decide to engage in serious peace talks to end 10 years of civil war. On Sunday, President Cristiani announced that the country was under a state of siege for a 30-day period. In addition, a 6 a.m.-6 p.m. curfew would be implemented. All Salvadoran media sources have been shut down, authorized to broadcast only reports and other programming distributed via government-run radio and TV. The military's Radio Cuzcatlan has been linked to private radio and TV stations. Since Saturday night, the rebels have reportedly closed off transport on three of the country's four major highways. The FMLN has also declared a transport boycott. Civilians have been warned to evacuate areas surrounding military barracks and offices. Rebel radio has broadcast that guerrillas will continue to sabotage electricity facilities and place mines in the area surrounding these sites. On Monday, foreign journalists reported that telephone communications from San Salvador to department capitals were inoperative. Government officials and military officers claim that the "situation" is nearly under control, and deny rebel statements of control over "any part of the national territory." Official spokespersons also deny that the Salvadoran air force has used automatic weapons, rockets and bombs in its attempts to rout rebels from their positions in densely populated residential neighborhoods in San Salvador and other cities. As a result of the media blackout in El Salvador, communications problems (telephone and road travel), and the state of siege, coverage of developments in El Salvador since Saturday has been somewhat confused and contradictory. Foreign journalists continue to dispatch stories based on sources in San Salvador, and on rebel radio broadcasts. Since the fighting began on Saturday, both Radio Venceremos and Radio Farabundo Marti have been broadcasting almost continuously. [The summary below is incomplete in that all sources received by the LADB on developments in El Salvador are not included, a result of the sheer quantity of material and time constraints. Coverage

of the offensive and related developments will be continued in subsequent issues.] Monday, November 11 National Guard director Col. Carlos Carrillo told reporters that guerrillas launched six homemade mortars at the Guard headquarters in northern San Salvador on Saturday morning. One of the mortars hit the compound injuring three soldiers. Another landed in a poor neighborhood, killing two children and injuring five civilians, Carrillo said. The colonel said the FMLN was probably behind the attack. The rebels did not claim responsibility. Witnesses told AP that one explosive hit a truck in the barracks and injured 10 soldiers. AFP reported that three guardsmen were injured when rebels opened fire from nearly a kilometer away and scored a hit inside the compound. On Saturday night, the FMLN launched simultaneous attacks on dozens of targets in San Salvador, and in eight of the country's 14 departments. Targets in San Salvador included the private and official residences of President Cristiani and the residence of Ricardo Alvarenga, president of the National Assembly. Notimex reported that the Zacamil suburb, located to the north of the capital, was transformed into a war zone on Saturday night. Two Red Cross workers were wounded when unidentified persons shot out the tires of their ambulance. By early Sunday, the international airport at Comalapa was closed after military installations were attacked by mortar fire, and because of fighting on the road between Comalapa and San Salvador. Sunday, November 12 Radio Venceremos reported that guerrillas had launched attacks in seven department capitals, and in 50 separate locations in San Salvador. The FMLN reported fighting in the cities of Santa Ana, San Miguel, San Vicente, Usulután, Zacatecoluca, San Francisco Gotera and Ilobasco. Rebels occupied the mayor's office in Zacatecoluca, capital of La Paz department. Fighting was reported on highways in the north, along the coast and on the PanAmerican highway. In San Salvador, the rebels reported that their combatants had established positions in the San Marcos, San Ramon, Santa Maria, San Antonio Abad, and Ciudad Delgado neighborhoods and suburbs. Rebels also dislodged troops assigned to guard duty at the Mariona prison. The FMLN reported destruction of two helicopters and 12 tanks since the offensive began. Military sources reported at least 127 people had been killed in the fighting, including 26 soldiers, 93 guerrillas and eight civilians. The armed forces press office said 65 soldiers, 55 rebels, and 35 civilians were wounded. AP said that according to reports by hospitals and the military, at least 317 people were wounded. Carlos Mendoza, spokesperson for the Salvadoran Red Cross, said in a telephone interview with AP that at least 20 civilians had been killed. Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas condemned the violence and called on both sides to immediately resume dialogue. The rebel radio network claimed 400 soldiers were killed or wounded in San Salvador alone. No figures of rebel casualties were provided. Fighting was reported in at least four departments on Sunday. In Washington, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney told NBC the offensive was "a move of desperation by the guerrillas." According to reporters who entered the Metropolis neighborhood in San Salvador, residents helped rebels dig trenches, and soldiers stayed at a distance. In at least one neighborhood they occupied, rebels held meetings to tell residents how to protect themselves from air attacks and other fighting. Notimex cited Red Cross sources who said ambulances were not permitted entry into the Zacamil neighborhood. An unidentified Red Cross worker said that three of the organization's vehicles had already been destroyed. He was interviewed during a rescue effort in Ciudad Delgado. At the Rosales Hospital, the city's largest, about 100 wounded had arrived in the past few hours. Dr. Rodolfo Morales Vazquez told Notimex that the situation was "chaotic." He said, "We don't have anaesthetics, antibiotics, blood, nothing..." The scene at the military hospital, said Notimex, was even more chaotic. A worker told Notimex that incoming wounded were being placed on the ground for lack of room. Notimex reported that around noon on Sunday, the air force intensified bombardment of rebel positions in at least six San Salvador neighborhoods. The army was apparently concentrated,

however, on attempting to rout the rebels from the densely populated Zacamil neighborhood. Machine-gun fire and rocket explosions were heard throughout the afternoon. DPA reported that the rebels launched attacks on the headquarters of the National Guard, and the police academy. On Sunday afternoon, Radio Venceremos broadcast a communique warning Salvadorans that areas near downed power lines had been mined and said first-aid vehicles should not transport military casualties. The rebel statement called on gasoline service stations to close immediately and ordered a transport boycott beginning at midnight. In a separate broadcast, rebel radio said the guerrillas had thus far destroyed 12 armored vehicles, three helicopters and a plane. Two other planes were damaged. In addition, rebel fighters had seized 50 rifles and machine guns. The FMLN said the rebels had control of San Salvador's four most densely populated neighborhoods located in the north: Zacamil, Cuscatancingo, Mejicanos and Panama. The suburbs and districts are home to 300,000 people. With the exception of Mejicanos, all are described as poor neighborhoods. Mejicanos has been characterized as middle- class or working-class. On Sunday evening, two armored vehicles fired on buildings at the University of El Salvador (UES). Three structures, including the medical school, were destroyed by fire and explosions. Notimex reported that later the 1st Infantry Brigade occupied the campus, and arrested 13 civilian employees. The rebel network reported that at least seven students were killed during the army occupation. On Sunday evening, President Alfredo Cristiani declared a nationwide 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew and a state of siege. The state of siege restricts transit, the freedom of expression, rights of assembly and privacy of correspondence. The cabinet approved the measure and the legislative assembly will vote on it Monday, the president said. Cristiani blamed Nicaragua for the escalation in the civil war, allegedly the result of increased arms shipments from Nicaragua to the FMLN. Monday, November 13 Radio Venceremos reported 500 casualties in San Salvador, and at least 400 dead nationwide. C-47 combat aircraft were flying low over the capital city throughout the day. Notimex reported that at least 300 had died in San Salvador. Air force bombing of in the northeastern area of the city was reported, encompassing at least six suburbs and neighborhoods. According to Notimex, soldiers shot at a press vehicle. Three foreign journalists, not yet identified, were apparently injured in cross-fire. The heaviest fighting was reported in the northern suburbs of Cuscatancingo, Mejicanos, Ayutuxtepeque, Zacamil, San Ramon and San Roque, and in several neighborhoods near the University of El Salvador. Notimex said the Zacamil and Metropolis areas had been at least partially emptied by Monday morning. Residents of other neighborhoods are attempting to leave the city in large numbers. On Monday, said Notimex, Mejicanos seemed to be the site of the heaviest and most prolonged fighting. Notimex said the actions of San Salvador residents had surprised journalists. In neighborhoods where there was no fighting or very little, the streets were empty. Meanwhile, in areas of the city where the racket of warfare was almost constant, residents were out in the streets and trying to participate in one way or another. Reporters receive information from residents without being solicited. Journalists are told of recent events, and shown the sites of fighting, explosions, and the dead and wounded. Some denounced the military bombings and machine-gun attacks, while others asked that journalists pressure the government to evacuate them and their families. Rebels are holed up in movie theaters, office buildings and houses. According to AP, at least 245 had been killed and 378 wounded since the offensive began. The armed forces mortuary had the bodies of 55 soldiers, 29 more than the army included in its official count. Helicopter gunships and military planes flew over the city to attack rebel positions. Nearly all downtown stores were closed. Fighting was reported outside Usulután in eastern El Salvador. Salvadoran legislators were reported to be considering more restrictions on civil rights. AP said a photographer who tried to reach the legislature's building Monday was turned back by gunfire. US Embassy spokesperson Barry Jacobs said an army

counteroffensive had been slowed because soldiers were ordered to avoid civilian casualties. At the United Nations in New York, Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar said it was "essential that minimal conditions be restored which will permit talks to resume and the peace process to be put back on track" in El Salvador. White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said, "We are most disappointed that at a time when regional differences around the world are being resolved by peaceful means, the FMLN has chosen the opposite path." He asserted that the scale of the FMLN offensive indicated Nicaragua had been increasing arms shipments to the Salvadoran guerrillas "to destabilize and overthrow the legitimate government... This violence highlights Daniel Ortega's gross violation of the Esquipulas" regional peace accord. At a recess during the Organization of American States general assembly meetings in Washington, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto said his government supports a cease-fire in El Salvador, and is not involved in any way in the guerrilla offensive. D'Escoto requested that the peacekeeping force recently approved by the UN Security Council be sent "immediately" to El Salvador to ensure that foreign interference does not occur in the Salvadoran civil war, and that human rights of civilians and prisoners are respected. Next, the minister called for the "immediate beginning" of negotiations between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government to be mediated by the OAS and the UN. In response to a question, d'Escoto said that it was hardly a "big surprise" that the Salvadoran government wants to blame Nicaragua for the rebel attacks. D'Escoto said that the nations of the hemisphere must attempt to mediate a cease-fire in El Salvador to avoid further bloodshed. "We should immediately request a cessation of hostilities to permit the Red Cross and other organizations to evacuate the wounded and deliver medical supplies and foodstuffs to civilians who need them." US State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said the offensive had caused close to 300 dead and more than 300 wounded. In an interview with Notimex in Zacamil, FMLN commander Carlos Argueta said that given the army's failure to dislodge the rebels from positions in northern San Salvador, "the course of events will permit us in a little while to continue on to major advances in the capital and at a national level." Argueta is a member of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), one of the FMLN's five rebel armies. The rebel commander said that the FMLN has requested several times that the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations be permitted to set up first aid posts in the area for civilians. "We have offered guarantees of total non-interference in their work to assist the residents...The first aide workers have told us they have attempted to come in, but the government refuses to let them pass," he said. The US Embassy said that 86 soldiers, 202 guerrillas and 17 civilians had been killed. Its count of 373 wounded included 189 soldiers, 96 rebels and 88 civilians. Fighting intensified Monday night in northeastern San Salvador when rebels attacked the San Benito national police batallion near the military headquarters. The military said Monday night that at least 67 soldiers and 127 guerrillas had been killed. On Monday night, rebels attacked the military compound housing the joint chiefs of staff headquarters and a barracks. Tuesday, November 14 Early Tuesday, the FMLN general command called for a "general insurrection." Broadcast on Radio Venceremos, the rebels said the document was read by Commander Joaquin Villalobos. He said people's governments would be set up in departments under rebel control: Morazan, San Miguel, La Union, Usulután, Cuscatlan, Chalatenango, San Vicente and Cabanas. The FMLN urged combatants to hold positions in the eight departments in central and eastern El Salvador. AP reported that a resident of the Zacamil neighborhood told a reporter by telephone that the rebels were advancing and taking up new positions closer to military installations. AP and Notimex reported that thousands of residents were trapped after combat intensified Monday night between rebels and the government, whose jets and helicopter gunships rocketed rebel positions in poor neighborhoods. Civilian casualties were high as government troops and rebels exchanged gunfire in residential districts. Along a wide

arc on San Salvador's northern fringe, rebels installed themselves in homes and apartments and put snipers in church towers and tall buildings. People in rebel-held areas said food and water were in short supply. Rebel radio reported that guerrillas had established positions on both the northern and southern perimeters of the city. In the south, the rebels have occupied factories, tall buildings and houses in the Soyapango suburb. AP reported that morgue workers said 51 civilians had been killed. Hospital workers said more than 220 civilians were wounded in the capital. The rebels claimed in a radio broadcast that 650 government soldiers had been killed or wounded, but gave no breakdown. The US Embassy said 1,500 of the rebels' estimated 7,000 regulars were fighting in the capital. The embassy listed the six other departments where combat was reported as Santa Ana, San Miguel, La Paz, Usulután, Chalatenango and San Vicente. According to AP, despite government denials, "it was clear that rebels held parts of northern and eastern neighborhoods in San Salvador, controlling some from positions in tall buildings. The armed forces declared a 24-hour curfew Tuesday in seven neighborhoods, justified because of the danger of snipers. Looting was reported in supermarkets in some poor neighborhoods in San Salvador. Rebel commanders in the occupied zones called on the armed forces to observe a brief cease-fire to allow residents to get food, water and medical supplies. An armed forces spokesman said he was not authorized to respond to the proposal. As combat intensified, hundreds of people fled Zacamil. Residents told AP they feared the army would attack. According to Xinhua, unconfirmed reports estimate that casualties number well over 1,000. A general strike is being prepared to support the rebel movement. Army chief of staff Col. Rene Emilio Ponce said the troops had caused 336 rebel casualties since Friday. Interviewed by government-run radio, Ponce said a vehicle carrying a shipment of arms and explosives from Nicaragua headed for the FMLN had been captured. He said the vehicle was driven by a "German citizen." The German, he added, was killed, and soldiers had arrested "other foreigners." According to Ponce, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and Foreign Minister d'Escoto were in Mexico giving total support to the FMLN. The colonel said "terrorists coming from Nicaragua could possibly be participating" in the FMLN offensive. Ponce asserted that only a few rebel positions remain in some northern neighborhoods. He "categorically affirmed" that the FMLN has no control of any territory inside El Salvador. At a press conference in the Zacamil neighborhood, FMLN commanders Claudio Armijo (Chico) and Carlos Argueta proposed the cease-fire. They said their military positions were "consolidated," but that civilian residents needed food, medicine and water. "We are not offering a cease-fire because we are tired of fighting. If they don't want a cease-fire, we won't give it to them. But they must not be deceived: we are strong in military and morale terms, and content to continue fighting," said Argueta. Military spokesperson Col. Raul Arturo Lopez said a 24-hour curfew had been decreed in eight neighborhoods where the most intense fighting had occurred since Friday, including Soyapango, Mejicanos, Zacamil, Auytuxtepeque, Ilopango, Santa Lucia and Ciudad Delgado. Lopez said the armed forces' concern for the civilian population motivated the curfew. AP reported that at least 466 people have been killed in the fighting in San Salvador since Saturday night. Citing military, hospital and morgue reports, AP said the total for the country is at least 503 dead and over 1,000 wounded. AP reported that aircraft rocketed and strafed rebel positions on the northern and eastern perimeters of San Salvador and thousands of residents fled the battle zones. The FMLN issued a communique calling on its forces to "take control of the whole country." At the same time, the the rebel command said it was willing to pursue a "democratic solution." US Ambassador William Walker told an afternoon news conference in the capital, "It is not a situation that is any means stable as yet." He said the FMLN was "pulling out all the stops" in the offensive but failing to achieve either its political or military objectives. Rebel commander Argueta told AP: "It's a new kind of war that could lead to the end of the war." AP reporters and

photographers in northern and eastern sections of the city were able to visit rebel-held zones and observed air attacks. US-supplied Skymaster propeller planes were seen firing rockets at residential areas in Zacamil and in Soyapango, an eastern suburb of the capital. Notimex said three armed Hughes-500 helicopters and one support helicopter, and a C-47 plane bombarded rebel positions in Soyapango and the San Jacinto suburb. In Soyapango, reporters witnessed troops firing on a Red Cross ambulance attempting to evacuate medical personnel. Reporters said the situation in Soyapango is "very critical," and dismissed the army's statements that the civilian population had been evacuated. In Mejicanos, the FMLN has reportedly consolidated its positions in the central area. Also in Mejicanos, said Notimex, troops fired on a clearly marked press vehicle carrying foreign journalists. Military sources reported 309 guerrillas had been killed, 160 wounded and 60 taken prisoner. The army has suffered 106 dead, and 231 wounded. Information Minister Mauricio Sandoval said the conflict was under control. He dismissed rumors of death squads deciding to distribute justice in their own way. Rebel radio reported 600 troop casualties. After three days of consolidating positions in Soyapango, Ciudad Delgado, Mexicanos, Ayutuxtepeque and Zacamil, the rebels announced their fighters were moving on to another phase of the offensive in San Salvador and elsewhere. Radio Venceremos reported indiscriminate bombing by air force of civilians in several neighborhoods of San Miguel: Coquera, Esmeralda, Urbanizacion Lopez, El Granillo and Santa Luisa. The FMLN reported destruction of the Santa Teresa barracks in La Paz department. According to rebel radio, a soldier from the 3rd Infantry Brigade (San Miguel department) deserted. According to the former soldier many troops in the brigade had refused to carry out orders to advance against the rebel fighters. Radio Venceremos denounced indiscriminate aerial bombing of Soyapango. In a separate broadcast, the rebels reported guerrilla occupation of positions in Ilopango, Zacatecoluca. On Tuesday afternoon in San Salvador, members of the Treasury Police confiscated videocassettes and photographs from the Centro de Comunicaciones (CDP), and accused journalists of collaborating with the FMLN. The CDP is a group of independent journalists who provide services to several foreign TV networks. Offices of US media organizations, including the Washington Post, are located in the same building. According to a report received by Xinhua, a public employees union has declared a strike to protest the government's aerial bombardment of poor neighborhoods. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias called for a cease-fire, and urged the FMLN to participate in the previously scheduled round of peace talks in Caracas. He condemned the FMLN offensive, saying "nothing can justify the use of violence as a means of showing strength in negotiations." Arias added that the regional peace accords are based on the legitimacy of the region's governments. (Basic data from numerous reports by Notimex, AFP, DPA, AP, Xinhua, Radio Farabundo Marti, Radio Venceremos, 11/11-14/89)

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