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Salvadoran Rebel Offensive: Summary Of Recent Events

by Deborah Tyroler

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Nov. 15: AP reported that the rebel offensive "appeared to falter." Shortly before dawn, explosions from the north, east and west sides of the capital boomed, as helicopter gunships fired rockets and heavy-caliber machine guns at rebel positions in Soyapango, Zacamil and Merliot neighborhoods. Thousands of residents fled their homes waving white flags. Rebels opened a new front in Merliot, on the west side, blocking the main road with trucks, and occupying several houses. On the east side, in the Soyapango area, paratroopers advanced slowly from a nearby air force base, fighting rebels house by house. AP reported that the bodies of at least two slain rebels lay on a street where Tuesday the rebels had maintained their local command post. Fighting also was reported in eastern provinces. In a Radio Venceremos broadcast early Wednesday, rebel commander Ana Guadalupe Martinez said the rebels had declared more than a quarter of the country "liberated." She said revolutionary committees had been established in dozens of towns. At a news conference, Vice President Francisco Merino said, "What we have at the moment is complete control over the entire national territory, and the terrorist delinquents have failed in their adventure." AP noted that his claim appeared exaggerated as the rebels were thoroughly entrenched in several areas in and around San Salvador, and elsewhere in the country. The government expanded limits on press freedoms with a directive sent to all local media prohibiting them from publishing any FMLN communique or those of any group intending to disseminate FMLN activities, and from "publication of information from foreign agencies or countries that maintain a clear opposition to the Salvadoran government and people." Next, the directive requires Salvadoran editors "to consult with the official source" on any war-related news. Based on a tally accumulated via several sources, AP reported that more than 500 have died, and more than 1,000 were wounded. Several hundred rebels, including two top commanders, were dug in at the northern capital district of Mejicanos. In contrast to Zacamil and Soyapango, said AP, most residents of Mejicanos have stayed in their homes, and many appeared to be assisting the rebels. AP reported that most of the civilians in Soyapango and Zacamil had left those areas by Wednesday afternoon. AFP reported that more than 600 have died. According to Xinhua, rebels concentrated activities in Santa Tecla and on the highway linking Puerto de la Libertad and San Salvador, while also maintaining positions in the northern suburbs. Radio Venceremos reported that rebels had taken control of the road between La Libertad and San Salvador, and the eastern route from the capital to Yopango, and to Santa Ana and Teuscal in the north. On Wednesday night the FMLN said it controlled 19 municipalities in eight departments, in addition to the northern suburbs of San Salvador. The rebels claimed they had caused 760 casualties among government troops, and destroyed or severely damaged 11 aircraft. Next, Radio Venceremos reported that the air force bombed the following population centers: La Hermita, Obreras, Santa Elena, La Esmeralda, Apopa, La Colera, Granillo, Soyapango, Zacamil and Ayutuxtepeque, located in Usulután, San Miguel, Sacatecoluca and northern San Salvador. State Department spokesperson Richard Boucher said that at least 657 Salvadorans had died in the fighting since Saturday night. On the same day, a Pentagon spokesperson requesting anonymity told reporters that 640 had died, including 146 soldiers and 461 rebels. The wounded include 388 soldiers, and 169 rebels. Eight soldiers have disappeared. A total of 33 civilians have been killed, and 232 wounded, said the spokesperson. The Pentagon source said that while fighting

has taken place throughout the country, it is concentrated in San Salvador, San Miguel and Santa Ana. In Los Angeles, some 300 persons organized a demonstration in front of the Salvadoran consulate to demand that the Salvadoran government permit the entry of the Red Cross into combat zones. The demonstration was organized by human rights organizations and Central American solidarity groups. Notimex cited Sara Martinez, spokesperson for El Rescate (a Los Angeles-based organization of Protestant churches dedicated to assisting Central Americans), as saying that on Monday the group had created an emergency medical assistance fund to purchase blood plasma and medicines. The Catholic Church called for an immediate truce toward protecting the civilian population, and demanded that both sides begin negotiations. In an interview with Notimex in Mejicanos, rebel commander Facundo Guardado said that the FMLN was planning to advance toward "absolute control of San Salvador," rather than simply maintaining existing positions. He said the rebels were advancing from the east, north, northeast, and south. AP reported that as of Wednesday night, more than 680 soldiers, rebels and civilians had been killed, and another 1,600 wounded in the fighting, according to morgue, hospital and government sources. Among them, at least 100 civilians have been killed and 800 injured, the sources said. Nov. 16: Government forces attacked rebel positions in the fiercest combat since the offensive began. Army mortars and reports from assault rifles echoed across the capital, with fire from the Zacamil neighborhood almost continuous from shortly before 4 a.m. until dawn. A-37 fighter-bombers rocketed low over the city in several runs westward, presumably toward rebel positions near the western suburb of Merliot. According to AP, deafening explosions following the swoops gave the impression the planes were dropping 250-pound or 500-pound bombs on insurgents concentrated on the lower slopes of the San Salvador volcano. Although only 1,500 guerrillas are believed to be involved in the attack in San Salvador, the entire city appeared to be besieged. Virtually all businesses and government offices were shut down, and the sounds of war were heard everywhere throughout the day. Intense fighting was reported around Jose Simeon Canas Central American University. FMLN leaders have reportedly acknowledged they cannot win the war militarily, but that they launched the offensive to prove the army could also not win, and that President Alfredo Cristiani would be unable to govern without a role for the FMLN in government. Amnesty International said 50 civilians, including three Jesuit priests, took refuge Thursday in a suburban church. Troops surrounding the church demanded that the people inside leave the building. Amnesty said the civilians were afraid to leave the premises because one of the priests was accused of plotting to overthrow President Cristiani. In Washington, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said the US was speeding up the delivery of military aid, primarily riot control equipment and light weaponry. OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares said an OAS delegation will go to El Salvador to seek an immediate truce, and that the delegation would travel to the country at the invitation of President Alfredo Cristiani. The secretary general offered to help mediate any eventual peace talks between the government and the rebels. AFP reported that the dead number at least 786. Several hundred guerrillas descended overnight from the hills above Mejicanos to try to take control of the main streets. According to AP, in Soyapango on the eastern side of the city, the rebels appeared to have backed down after intense house-to-house combat. Fighting also continued in northern Zacamil. Uniformed security officers raided a downtown Lutheran Church office and arrested 12 missionary workers, including four US citizens, a Canadian, a Spaniard, and six West Germans. A Canadian consular official cited by AP said the workers were being detained at Treasury Police headquarters. Radio Venceremos broadcast a communique by the FMLN high command stating that rebel intelligence sources have information indicating that US pilots had been carrying out bombing operations over San Salvador, result of incompetence by Salvadoran pilots. The US combat

pilots were reportedly flown in from Honduras. The same communique said that on Nov. 15, a company of Kaibiles troops arrived in El Salvador from Guatemala, in response to pressure by the Bush administration for the intervention of regional armies in the Salvadoran war. The Kaibiles are elite Guatemalan troops. According to a report by the national office of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), "US ships have...been seen off the coast of El Salvador ready to intervene to defend the ARENA government and Guatemalan and Honduran troops are reported to have been moved to the Salvadoran border." Nov. 17: AP reported that by dawn, fighting had tapered off in the capital. At least 800 people have been killed and 1,600 wounded nationwide since the offensive began. Sporadic fighting was reported throughout the day. Notimex reported that the rebels abandoned positions in Zacamil around midnight, and moved into Mejicanos. Reporters said the bodies of eight rebels were seen, and that the area is now under complete army control. All military fire on Friday was reportedly concentrated in Mejicanos. The air force began bombarding the neighborhood with rockets and bombs at about 11:30 a.m. British journalist David Mike Blundy of the London Sunday Times was seriously wounded in cross fire between rebels and government troops in the Mejicanos district of San Salvador. In an early afternoon report, Notimex said that Blundy had died at a hospital in San Salvador. At the UN, an annual human rights report said the Salvadoran government had presided over a "resurgence of torture" this year and a crackdown on trade unions and organizations. The resurgence included sexual abuse and beatings of prisoners and summary executions of political opponents, according to Jose Antonio Pastor Ridruejo, a special representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights. Pastor said, "The special representative is again extremely disturbed by the number and seriousness of the human rights violations committed thus far in 1989, particularly by the resurgence of torture. "Members of the state apparatus, particularly of the armed forces, have carried out politically motivated summary executions whose exact numbers cannot be determined but are generally comparable to those for last year." As of Oct. 14, Pastor said, the justice minister told him about 250 people were detained for political offenses, "a much higher figure than the previous year." Non- governmental organizations that contacted Pastor in El Salvador during his Oct. 8-14 visit "complained about a marked increase in the torture of political prisoners by their interrogators," said Pastor. "Witnesses belonging to organizations invariably made roughly the same statement: Long periods of interrogation while blindfolded and without being able to sit down or rest, extensive beatings, continuous use of a hood which impedes breathing and causes fainting, electric shocks in water tanks, use of drugs and acids, and on many occasions rape and sexual abuse of both women and men, as well as threat to family members," Pastor said. "Witnesses who did not belong to organizations complained of psychological ill-treatment and sometimes of beatings and death threats to themselves or to members of their families," he said. According to Pastor, "thus far in 1989, government action against trade unions and peasant and other organizations has increased." The government claims that some of these organizations answer to the FMLN. DPA reported that "observers" say up to 1,000 people have died since Saturday. The Guatemalan government denied reports that it was sending elite soldiers to help El Salvador defeat the rebel offensive. The OAS mission is scheduled to arrive in El Salvador on Saturday, Nov. 18. The International Red Cross said its workers were still unable to get to wounded civilians in neighborhoods where rebel positions have been under aerial bombardment. (Basic data from several reports by AP, Notimex, AFP, 11/15-17/89; Reuters, 11/16/89; 11/16/89 report by CISPES national office, 11/17/89; Radio Venceremos, 11/15/89, 11/16/89; DPA, 11/17/89)

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