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Fighting Continues In El Salvador: Summary Of Recent Developments

by Deborah Tyroler

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Nov. 23: Three helicopter gunships and an A-37 Air Force plane strafed and bombed rebel positions at the foot of the San Salvador volcano for more than an hour late Thursday. Army artillery gunners pounded the same area around midnight, while Air Force planes dropped flares in the western sector through the night, searching for rebel positions. Nov. 24: In San Salvador, business slowly returned to normal for the third consecutive day. All national banks were open, although 40% announced shorter hours. Factories also reopened, some of them for the first time since Nov. 11. A power shortage affected half of the capital. Although traffic in the capital appeared normal, 95% of transportation elsewhere in the country was paralyzed. The FMLN declared a ground transportation strike Nov. 13, two days after it launched its offensive. According to figures released by the military, a total of 1,768 have died since the rebel offensive began, including 284 soldiers and 1,484 rebels. Nov. 26: Heavy fighting between government troops and rebels resumed. The Salvadoran military launched air attacks on FMLN positions west of the capital near the San Salvador volcano. In a news release, the armed forces press committee said that an army patrol had sighted a group of guerrillas near a power transformer on the northwest edge of the capital and helicopters and C-47 warplanes chased them as they fled up the slopes of the volcano. The aircraft rocketed and strafed the area for several hours. Early Sunday, military sources said troops had killed 11 rebels and wounded another seven during the previous 12 hours in San Miguel and La Paz departments, and in San Salvador. Nov. 28: Rebels resumed attacks on army positions around the capital Monday. Infantry troops supported by artillery and helicopter gunships attacked rebel positions, killing four guerrillas and capturing arms and explosives, according to military sources. Fighting was reported in Chalatenango department. Rebel sources reported downing a helicopter near the city of the same name, and killing at least four government troops. Nov. 28: A communique by the five top commanders of the FMLN read over Radio Venceremos follows: "That [President Alfredo] Cristiani, in his argument about the alleged shipment of weapons to the FMLN from Nicaragua, attempts to: "Shift attention from the criticisms against his government for the savage bombings and artillery attacks on the civilian population, and especially, the assassination of the six [Jesuit] priests and other grave violations of human rights. "Alleviate the pressure on his government for having rejected FMLN proposals for an internationally supervised cease-fire and negotiations, and the FMLN's acceptance of demands from the international community. "Avoid the responsibility of non-compliance with the Esquipulas II agreements requiring his government to implement democratization, and concerted efforts to realize a cease-fire and national reconciliation... "We reaffirm our total readiness for an internationally supervised cease-fire and for a negotiated solution which must be the result of a nationally constructed effort that will establish a firm and lasting peace in El Salvador." Nov. 29: Mortars exploded and gunfire resounded in northern San Salvador. Before dawn, about 10 flares were dropped by circling helicopters over the northern neighborhoods of Mejicanos and Ciudad Delgado, and more than two dozen mortar rounds were heard. Rebels launched surprise pre-dawn attacks on military positions. Helicopters and O-2 spotter aircraft fired machine guns and rockets at suspected guerrilla positions west and south

of the capital for several hours before dawn. Heavy fighting was observed in luxury residential neighborhoods in San Salvador, including Escalon, San Benito and San Francisco, and in the cities of San Miguel and Usulután. Witnesses said helicopter gunships were firing on rebel positions near the headquarters of the military high command in the southeast of the city. An army spokesperson said the military headquarters had not come under direct attack but that there was heavy fighting in surrounding areas, where many officers reside. Residents said rebel sharpshooters had taken up positions at strategic crossroads in the western part of Escalon. Radio Venceremos claimed that the elite Bracamonte battalion had been forced out of the neighborhood. In Washington, White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said homes of US citizens, including embassy staff, had been attacked by the rebels. Secretary of State James Baker said the rebels were "shooting their way into and invading certain private homes." He said guerrillas "briefly overran" the home of a US Embassy officer in the San Benito neighborhood, but were driven out by Salvadoran soldiers. Citing unidentified diplomatic sources, the Washington Post (11/30/89) said one embassy officer's home was overrun when the rebels climbed over the wall as they were being pursued by soldiers. The sources said the US citizens retreated to a secure room and locked themselves in. The rebels stayed in the house for three to four hours, but did not bother the persons locked in the secure room, nor exchange fire with them. The house in San Benito was partially burned when the armed forces fired at it with mortars. The New York Times (12/01/89) reported an embassy official and his maid were seized at gunpoint by rebels and held hostage for 14 hours inside the official's home. The diplomat was released at dawn, when the rebels withdrew. Unidentified US diplomats cited by the Times said they made contact with representatives of the FMLN and warned the group not to harm the captured man, who was not named. But the official said no direct threats were made against his life. Radio Venceremos broadcast an FMLN communique stating that US personnel were not rebel targets. The FMLN appealed to US citizens, especially those in Escalon, to remain indoors and to identify themselves if they came into contact with guerrilla fighters. The communique also urged US troops and guards in El Salvador to refrain from joining the combat. Throughout the day, Radio Venceremos broadcast constant calls to all residents of Escalon, San Benito and other neighborhoods where fighting was underway, asking them to evacuate their homes as government artillery fire on rebel positions was expected soon. The radio also reported that rebels had launched simultaneous attacks on San Miguel and Usulután, and had taken up positions in those cities. Secretary of State James Baker urged the Soviet Union to halt the flow of Soviet-made weapons to the rebels, saying they were still arriving in El Salvador from Nicaragua and Cuba. Government sources in San Salvador said the FMLN attacked with artillery and rifle fire on the Armed Forces' Public Security Academy, located in the western suburb of Merliot. Academy director Col. Rigoberto Soto said the attack was repelled. In a brief statement, the military press office said there were shooting incidents in several parts of the capital, in San Miguel and in Usulután. Wilfredo Hernandez, soundman of a crew of the Spanish language network Univision, was wounded in the fighting in upper Escalon. White House spokesperson Roman Popadiuk said US embassy personnel were told not to report to work Wednesday, and the embassy was closed for the day. AFP cited an anonymous Salvadoran Foreign Ministry source who said guerrillas took over the Japanese Embassy, located in the San Benito suburb. He said only a few embassy personnel were inside and the rebels allowed relief workers to evacuate them. A diplomatic source, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the rebels seized the residence of a French diplomat, but allowed those inside to be evacuated. He gave no details. US Embassy spokesperson Barry Jacobs said a charter flight might depart Thursday with embassy dependents who want to leave El Salvador, and embassy personnel who planned to go home for Christmas would leave early.

He said some dependents and other US citizens had moved into the heavily fortified embassy in downtown San Salvador to get away from the fighting a few miles away. A communique read over Radio Venceremos follows: "The General Command of the FMLN orders all our units located in Colonia Escalon and San Benito to suspend all operations in those neighborhoods, between 6:00 am and 12:00 noon on Thursday, Nov. 30, given that an evacuation of foreign personnel will take place in that area. "All operations in that area can be resumed at 12:00 noon." Nov. 30: The Roman Catholic Church's Tutela Legal office issued a report concluding that soldiers carried out the Nov. 16 massacre of six Jesuit priests and their two domestic employees. Military spokespersons said five soldiers and 12 guerrillas were killed in Wednesday's fighting. AP said reporters counted the bodies of at least 10 soldiers and saw one dead guerrilla, a woman still clutching her US-made M-16 rifle. Later, Notimex reported seeing the bodies of five rebels in an Escalon street. Rebels observed a six-hour truce beginning at 6 a.m. local time to permit evacuation of those who wished to leave Escalon and San Benito. According to AP, Escalon was quiet Thursday afternoon and remaining residents ventured out to assess damage and clear rubble. Soldiers moved cautiously along the streets and drew no fire. The last rebel snipers appeared to have pulled out from their nests in 30 to 40 sumptuous homes. Most appeared to have retreated up nearby San Salvador volcano by dawn. According to AP, about 20 US citizens were among scores of people who took advantage of the truce to leave Escalon. Notimex reported that "hundreds" of US citizens were evacuated from Escalon Thursday morning. Unidentified diplomatic sources cited by AP said about 250 US citizens would fly out of El Salvador on Thursday evening. Notimex reported that about 200 US citizens left El Salvador on Thursday morning, and another 400 were scheduled to leave Thursday night. In Washington, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said "departure is voluntary for all embassy dependents and personnel who are scheduled for leave or can be spared. We do not know how many private American residents will take advantage of this opportunity. We are encouraging American dependents and personnel who can be spared to depart." About 100 US citizens, almost all women and children, spent Wednesday night at the US Embassy and were to leave Thursday in a chartered jet, embassy spokesperson Barry Jacobs said. He said the Salvadoran national airline TACA planned extra flights for the next few days to carry others who wanted to leave. Jacobs refused to call it an evacuation, since the departures were "voluntary." According to Jacobs, there are between 8,000 and 10,000 US citizens in El Salvador at any one time, about 400 to 500 of them employees of the embassy and the Agency for International Development and their dependents. In Tokyo, a Foreign Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity to AP, denied that Japan's diplomatic liaison office had been taken over by rebels, but said staffers reported fighting in the neighborhood. Japan reduced its embassy in San Salvador to liaison status early in the war. AP cited a US embassy spokesperson, Jeff Brown, who said that perhaps 100 to 200 rebels had taken positions in Escalon and San Benito, heavily armed and moving in small groups. A communique by the FMLN general command read over Radio Venceremos follows: "Regarding concerns about the escalation of the Salvadoran conflict, it is necessary to say that the Salvadoran armed forces were the first to escalate the war by launching indiscriminate aerial bombing attacks against densely populated urban areas. Such actions have been implemented by the Salvadoran military in recent years in rural areas. Because of the damages caused to civilians by this activity, since 1987 the FMLN has proposed several measures to deescalate the war, including the suspension of aerial attacks and the use of aircraft in the fighting. In this sense, the Salvadoran government's complaint [about the FMLN's use of land-to-air missiles] is hypocritical because it...has transformed aircraft into instruments of genocide against the Salvadoran people. "The policies of the previous US administration transformed the Central American region into a large arms market by introducing

thousands of tons of Soviet and North American weaponry, including surface-to-air missiles. A black market in weapons was created in which Salvadoran and Honduran officers and Nicaraguan contras have participated as the biggest traffickers. "The Salvadoran government has launched a campaign of accusations against Nicaragua attempting to create a smoke screen to hide their ongoing genocide and to divert the attention of the international community which has demanded that the government: stop its massive, indiscriminate bombardments of densely populated urban areas and its witchhunt against all opposition and popular movement activists; investigate the assassination of the six Jesuit priests and their two employees, and punish those responsible for these and similar crimes; and, to accept a cease-fire... "Cristiani's decision to suspend relations with Nicaragua, based on the alleged shipment of missiles to the FMLN, is not reasonable even if [the government] argues that such action means an escalation of the war in El Salvador. The US government is the one that has escalated the war by providing \$4 billion in aid to triple the size of the Salvadoran army and to equip it with a sophisticated air force. The justification for this has always been Nicaraguan support for the FMLN, thereby denying the internal causes of the conflict and keeping the door to negotiations closed. "[The US aid] has only prolonged the suffering of the Salvadoran people, dramatizing their legitimate struggle to achieve authentic democracy, pluralism and a non-aligned government. "In light of the above, we reaffirm that: "We consider it our legitimate right to procure all kinds of weapons in order to defend ourselves and to protect our people from the ongoing military escalation generated by the Salvadoran government with the decisive support of the former and present US administrations. Our right includes the acquisition of weapons from whatever sources and their introduction to combat zones by any means available to us. "...We are ready for an internationally supervised cease-fire and the opening up of real negotiations to end the war with the participation of all political and social forces of the nation. "We are ready to abstain from using surface-to-air missiles if the Salvadoran air force completely ceases its bombardments, rocketing and strafing over all national territory." (Basic data from AP, 11/28-30/89; AFP, 11/24/89, 11/28/89, 11/29/89; Notimex, 11/29/89, 11/30/89; Xinhua, 11/28/89; Radio Venceremos, 11/28/89, 11/30/89; Washington Post, 11/30/89; New York Times, 11/30/89, 12/01/89)

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