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El Salvador: Update On Fighting

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 6: According to Radio Venceremos, rebels caused 40 casualties to government troops in the La Esmeralda district of Zacatecoluca during over four hours of heavy fighting. The rebels also reported 23 troop casualties in the past 48 hours in fighting on the outskirts of San Salvador. At midnight, rebel units took positions in San Benito, Loma Linda and La Mascota in the northern area of the capital. Police said that with the exception of one bus that was set afire, San Salvador was quiet. Guerrillas released a US helicopter mechanic they had held prisoner for 22 hours on Wednesday. Over Radio Venceremos, the rebels identified the man as Jack Cooper, and said he was a US military adviser. US Embassy spokesperson Jeff Brown said the man's surname is not Cooper, but would not identify him. He added that the man is not an adviser, but rather a civilian helicopter mechanic under contract to the military advisers based in El Salvador. The rebels said they detained Cooper late Tuesday at a guerrilla roadblock on the western side of San Salvador, in the Escalon neighborhood. The guerrillas said the man and a Salvadoran woman companion were briefly questioned and released. Brown said the man was detained in upper Escalon, but was held from 7:30 p.m. Tuesday until 6 a.m. Wednesday. He said the man's car was stolen and he was forced to stand for "several hours," and his thumbs were tied behind his back while he was held. Dec. 7: On Thursday morning, Radio Venceremos reported that fighting continued in southern San Salvador, and in the Soyapango district. The army reported fighting on San Salvador's northern outskirts early Thursday and said at least 110 guerrillas were killed. Most of the fighting was at three coffee plantations on the lower slopes of the San Salvador volcano, about three miles northwest of the capital. Reporters visited the Oakland, Fincona and Victoria (or Valencia) plantations Thursday and found no rebel corpses. Workers said there had been no fighting. Rebels infiltrated seven neighborhoods to the north, west and east of the city, including the working class suburb of Ayutuxtepeque. The sound of machine guns and mortar fire was heard throughout the night, but the fighting abated soon after dawn. Rebels threw up roadblocks comprised of burning vehicles on the highways leading north and west from San Salvador, mined streets and cut all electricity in the capital. Officials of the state power company said that rebel sabotage of the power grid had left 95% of the country without electricity. Power was shut down for 12 hours throughout San Salvador, with the exceptions of certain hospitals and clinics. The rebels claimed they shot down a military helicopter, but the government said it crashed because of a mechanical problem. Rebels destroyed two city buses and five private automobiles in Santa Ana, 25 miles west of San Salvador, and a burlap bag factory in San Miguel. A dynamite attack was reported on a bridge on the Litoral Highway near Usulután. Officials put the death toll since Nov. 11 at around 2,000, with a similar number injured. [The rebels call current actions the second phase of their offensive launched Nov. 11. Rebel radio broadcasts say the FMLN's objective is not to defend occupied positions, but rather to bring the war to the country's major cities.] (Basic data from AP, 12/06/89, 12/07/89; AFP, Notimex, 12/07/89)

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