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El Salvador: Notes On Rebels' "limited Offensive"

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On Nov. 20, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) launched a series of coordinated attacks in several departments. (See CAU 11/23/90 for previous coverage.) Rebel activity has been concentrated in the eastern region, and surrounding San Salvador. The most recent government estimate of casualties show 91 dead including 39 soldiers, 44 rebels and eight civilians, and 300 wounded. The FMLN reports 450 military casualties. As of Nov. 27, the rebels had destroyed or damaged eight aircraft. Surface-to-air missiles were used to down of the aircraft, reportedly marking the first time the FMLN has used such weaponry. Developments are summarized below.

Nov. 20: UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar denounced the rebel offensive which he said endangered the UN-mediated peace talks. Nov. 21: In a Radio Venceremos report, the FMLN said rebels using anti-aircraft weapons downed a military reconnaissance plane in Usulután department. Military spokespersons said the O-2 crash was caused by mechanical failure. Nov. 22: Military sources reported that rebels killed five soldiers and wounded five others in a mortar attack on an army base in San Miguel department. Next, rebel snipers set up a barricade of the Troncal del Norte highway by shooting out the tires of at least 25 vehicles. Nov. 23: In Usulután, rebels clashed with soldiers from the 6th Infantry Brigade. The armed forces press agency (COPREFA) reported that the guerrillas downed an air force A-37 fighter plane providing air support during the fighting. Meanwhile, air force commander Gen. Rafael Villamariona said the plane crash was caused by mechanical failure. Later in the day, the military released a communique charging that the FMLN had used Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles to down the aircraft. According to the communique, the missiles were obtained from the Nicaraguan government under former president Daniel Ortega. The non-governmental Salvadoran Human Rights Committee released a communique in San Salvador denouncing indiscriminate shooting and air attacks by the armed forces against civilians. The FMLN likewise charged that while rebel units attacked military targets, soldiers had not attempted to focus their response on rebel targets, and were thus responsible for the large number of civilian casualties. The army confirmed that nearly 100 homes had been destroyed in fighting throughout the country since Nov. 20. In radio and television broadcasts, government spokespersons announced that the FMLN had agreed to end its limited offensive result of appeals by the Costa Rican government and the UN Secretary General. FMLN leader Salvador Samayoa told SALPRESS in Mexico City that the government's announcement was "false." He said that while Perez de Cuellar had communicated with rebel leaders, no "concrete proposal" had been presented. Samayoa asserted that the FMLN would not terminate their military actions unless a specific cease-fire proposal was offered. In Costa Rica, rebel leader Miguel Saenz reiterated Samayoa's statements. The state-run electricity company reported that 10 major power lines were out of commission in the capital and that damage to the nation's electricity grid was responsible for power blackouts affecting nearly 60% of the country. In several areas of San Salvador, electricity rationing has been imposed, limiting power use to five hours per day. Many San Salvador neighborhoods have been without water since Tuesday. Tanker trucks were dispatched to supply water to the densely populated areas on the outskirts of the capital. In San Salvador, rebels destroyed at least 20 private vehicles and four city buses. COPREFA reported that the rebels had downed nine electricity pylons which they used to blockade the Troncal del Norte highway, at a point 17 km. from the capital. Traffic was brought

to a standstill. FMLN units attacked civil defense headquarters in Texistepeque, 70 km. from the capital. No casualties were reported. COPREFA reported that a branch office of an agricultural development bank was bombed in the La Libertad neighborhood, located on the outskirts of the capital. In addition, rebels damaged a helicopter in the area. Rebel sources reported that the army suffered 80 casualties during clashes in Santa Elena, Usulután, and Chalatenango. Nov. 24: The FMLN released a communique announcing plans to reorganize itself into a professional army called the "National Army for Democracy." Under the new structure, the rebels will be ranked from soldier to lieutenant, and all units are to be directed by a single high command. Spokespersons for the Salvadoran military and the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) dismissed the rebel announcement as ridiculous. Maria Julia Hernandez, director of the San Salvador archdiocesan legal aid office, described the FMLN's decision as a step backwards in the struggle to establish respect for human rights. In Honduras, the Central American Security Commission issued a statement requesting that the UN Secretary General act to persuade the rebels to terminate large-scale military activities. The commission characterized the FMLN's recent actions as an impediment to efforts aimed at reducing troop strength and weaponry in the region. Commission members include foreign and defense ministers from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The Red Cross reported that in San Salvador, three civilians were killed and six more were seriously wounded when unidentified persons tossed a fragmentation grenade in their path. COPREFA reported the deaths of two soldiers during fighting in Santa Elena and El Triunfo, southeast of San Salvador. In Morazan department, said COPREFA, soldiers discovered two graves containing the bodies of at least 12 guerrillas killed earlier in the week. Nov. 26: COPREFA reported that Lt. Eduardo Carballo and seven other soldiers pertaining to the Artillery Brigade were killed in an ambush in San Vicente department. Social democrat politician Guillermo Ungo asserted that the use of surface-to-air missiles by the FMLN will serve to speed up an end to the war because it will force the government to negotiate in earnest. The FMLN launched coordinated attacks in six towns in northern Usulután department. In addition, rebels occupied the coffee processing plant in Santiago de María and distributed coffee to peasants in the area. COPREFA reported that nine soldiers died and 13 wounded, and two rebels were killed and seven wounded during clashes in Jucuarán, Usulután. Telephone service to Jucuarán was down as a result of the fighting. A Radio Venceremos report indicated that 14 soldiers from the 6th Infantry Brigade were killed and 21 were injured the fighting. The FMLN said that rebel units confiscated an 81 mm. mortar, two M-60 machine guns, seven M-16 rifles, and a PRC-77 radio. Radio Venceremos reported that rebels occupied a section of the El Litoral highway near Jiquilisco, Usulután department, where they downed an UH-1H helicopter. Two soldiers were killed and two more were injured. Rebel units occupied Santa Elena, California and Nueva Granada, all in Usulután. COPREFA reported that six soldiers were killed in San Salvador when a grenade tossed by rebels exploded. Nov. 27: FMLN units in Jiquilisco, Usulután department, destroyed a railway trestle. Citing the government's Human Rights Commission, the Red Cross, the Health Ministry and local police, Defense Ministry spokespersons delivered a report on civilian casualties. In Chalatenango department, fighting in the capital city left 11 civilians dead and 78 wounded. Eight homes were partially or completely destroyed by machine gun, mortar and rocket fire. In the city of Usulután, six civilians were killed and 53 injured. In San Francisco Gotera, capital of Morazan department, four civilians were killed and 13 more wounded. In Apopa, Nejapa and Quezaltepeque, located north of San Salvador, two civilians were killed and 65 were wounded. COPREFA reported that fighting in the departments of San Vicente and Usulután left two rebels dead and seven wounded. During a press conference in Costa Rica, FMLN leader Miguel Saenz confirmed that the rebels possess SAM 7, SAM 14 and Red Eye surface-to-air missiles.

According to Saenz, the FMLN has had the missiles since November, 1989, but refrained from using them until training in their use was deemed sufficient. Saenz announced that the FMLN had submitted a program to the UN for concluding the peace talks by Jan. 31, 1991. The program calls for discussion on military issues until the end of December. Other topics outlined in the Caracas agenda including human rights, electoral reforms, reorganization of the nation's judiciary would be closed out by late January. (Basic data from AFP, 11/22/90, 11/23/90, 11/24/90, 11/26/90, 11/27/90; Washington Post, 11/21/90, 11/22/90; AP, Notimex, 11/23/90)

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