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Special Analysis

EL SALVADOR: The Military Balance

During the last several months, the insurgents have increasingly demonstrated a capability to overrun small towns and isolated military garrisons, thereby inflicting heavier losses on government personnel. The Army has responded again with large-scale sweep operations against guerrilla strongholds. These actions continue to have little lasting impact, however, and the government has little prospect of substantially weakening insurgent resistance before the elections in March 1984. The government probably hopes that, with continued US assistance, it can at least regain the initiative over the next year. (S-NF)

Some 3,500 government troops were killed or wounded in 1982, an increase of more than 20 percent from the previous year. Losses have been particularly high since mid-October, when the insurgents began a series of offensives that are continuing sporadically. (S-NF)

The insurgents also have captured large numbers of prisoners, including over 250 in late 1982. They subsequently released the prisoners in an attempt to weaken the military's willingness to fight. (S-NF)

In addition, government forces conceded insurgent control, at least temporarily, over large areas of eastern Chalatenango and northern Morazan Departments. This has strengthened the morale of the guerrillas, who claim some of these areas are "liberated." The insurgents also have seized upon recent political infighting in the Constituent Assembly and the officer corps to underscore the disunity in San Salvador. (S-NF)

Persistent Problems

The government has failed to take full advantage of the strengthening of the armed forces over the past year to gain a military advantage. The Air Force now has 18 UH-1H helicopters and six A-37 counterinsurgency aircraft, and the Army has two new US-trained and two Venezuelan-trained battalions--bringing total military and security personnel to more than 30,000. The new units,

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however, have been used primarily in major operations that have failed to weaken the guerrillas significantly.

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The military's ability to capitalize on the improvements is hindered by poor leadership, inadequate training, and the continuation of a garrison mentality. Many departmental commanders still are appointed more for their political loyalty than for their command ability. Competent officers are sometimes removed because of their opposition to the top leadership, as illustrated by the recent rebellion led by Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa. ~~(S NF)~~

New recruits still serve only 18 months and, because there is no standard training, units are often committed to combat prematurely. In areas of insurgent strength, there also is a reluctance to conduct aggressive small-unit patrolling because of fear of guerrilla ambushes.

~~(S NF)~~

Guerrilla Gains

The insurgents appear to have at least maintained their personnel strength over the past year. They may even have increased it somewhat to as many as 4,000 to 6,000 armed regulars. ~~(S NF)~~

The guerrillas also continued to receive arms via Nicaragua, with air delivery receiving high priority because of Honduran and Salvadoran land and sea interdiction efforts. As a result of the adequate supplies of arms, the insurgents apparently have been able to make better use of their 5,000 to 10,000 local militia and other support personnel for offensive operations. ~~(S NF)~~

In addition, the insurgents have improved cooperation recently among their different factions, resulting in more joint operations and better coordination of offensive plans. Serious rivalries remain, however, particularly between the two largest factions. One still favors a prolonged war and prefers small-unit operations, while the other believes large-scale attacks are needed to touch off a spontaneous popular revolt. ~~(S NF)~~

Outlook

Without the aid they have received from the US over the past several years, the armed forces might already

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have lost the war. To prevent the guerrillas from making major gains, continued aid at least at the current level will be necessary to offset Cuban and Nicaraguan support for the insurgents. Moreover, without an amnesty proposal and a serious civic action program, the government appears to have little chance permanently to reduce insurgent control over specific regions. (S NF)

To regain the military initiative and provide adequate security for isolated towns, the Army would have to adopt more aggressive patrolling and mount hit-and-run raids. This would require effective small-unit leadership, better use of intelligence, improved mobility, and better coordination of forces--factors still lacking in many operations. (S NF)

Such changes, however, are likely to come slowly. Even if the military leadership manages to stick together over the next year, the Army will be hard pressed to do more than hold its own until the elections. (S NF)

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