



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 January 1984

EL SALVADOR: DEALING WITH DEATH SQUADS (U)

Summary

We believe efforts by the civilian government and the military high command to crack down on rightwing violence have made little progress and have been aimed almost exclusively at placating Washington. Salvadoran officials understandably feel uneasy about openly confronting rightwing extremists; death threats and other forms of intimidation against national leaders are commonplace, and often are carried out. Defense Minister Vides--whose room to maneuver is limited--appears both personally disinclined and professionally unable to effect a major change in the armed forces any time soon. (b)(3) NatSecAct

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Palliative Response

Since December, the response of the government and military leaders to the problem of rightwing violence has been mainly verbal. For the past several weeks, government officials have publicly denounced death squads, and military leaders have pledged in the local press to punish human rights offenders

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This memorandum was requested by Vice-President Bush. It was prepared by [redacted] ALA, and was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer and the Directorate of Operations. It contains information available as of 20 January 1984. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle America-Caribbean Division, ALA, [redacted] (b)(3) CIAAct

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within the armed forces. Subordinate officers also have received lectures on avoiding involvement with rightwing terrorist organizations. (b)(1) (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct

[redacted]-policy meetings were held by senior military officers on 12 December to discuss "requirements" presented by Vice President Bush during his visit to San Salvador. Consensus was reached that a few unsavory officers identified by US officials would be transferred and that a military committee would be appointed to investigate abuses within the armed forces. (b)(3) NatSecAct

Concrete Action

Two mid-level police intelligence officers have been transferred to diplomatic posts overseas. This gesture is offset, however, by their replacement with ultrarightist officers, one of whom is a documented leader of a police death squad. Moreover, in the course of recent general orders, several other notorious rightwing extremists have been assigned to prestigious commands. These include Lieutenant Colonels Moran, Zepeda, Zacapa, Ponce, and Staben--all close associates of ultrarightist standard-bearer Roberto D'Aubuisson and his Nationalist Republican Alliance. (b)(3) NatSecAct

The military has reluctantly followed through on US demands to detain Captain Eduardo Avila, suspected of helping to arrange the murders of two US labor advisers in January 1981. Avila is temporarily being held on charges stemming from his being on self-imposed inactive duty for the past 18 months--a vague form of AWOL. Senior military officers reportedly believe that Avila's uncle--a Supreme Court Judge--has manipulated the legal process to protect his nephew, and Salvadoran authorities claim that more serious charges cannot now be legally brought against Avila. (b)(3) NatSecAct

Nevertheless, the US Embassy in Costa Rica reports that the government there has sent documentation to El Salvador charging Avila with terrorist activities in 1982, when he served as an attache in San Jose. US officials hope that these new charges will enable Salvadoran authorities to hold Avila long enough for the murder case against him to be developed or until he agrees to testify against his accomplices. (b)(3) NatSecAct

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Meanwhile, an ad hoc investigative team has been set up by Defense Minister Vides to oversee reports of abuses within the armed forces. Nevertheless, the team leader, Captain Arango of the National Guard, is a cohort of former Major D'Aubuisson. In 1979, Arango reportedly was a leader of the notorious White Warriors Union--a death squad that spec[redacted] iminating members of the Catholic clergy. [redacted] (b)(3) NatSecAct

General Vides has requested US aid to help form a bona fide commission to investigate both rightwing and leftwing terrorist groups. He and other military officers also reportedly have told some of D'Aubuisson's civilian aides to leave the country or face future investigations into their alleged death squad activities. For the moment, however, D'Aubuisson's civilian henchmen have rejected such threats and have made clear that they intend to remain in El Salvador. [redacted] (b)(3) NatSecAct

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Addendum

While the efforts by the Salvadoran government and military high command to crack down on rightwing violence have been mainly verbal, they nevertheless have had a positive effect in El Salvador. Rightwing violence has been greatly reduced in the past month, and the death squads have generally toned down their public threats and propaganda efforts. Such threats have not ceased entirely, however, and in early January one extremist group publicly warned the military high command that it was becoming too subservient to the US. (b)(3) NatSecAct

The reduction of rightwing threats and violence has been well received in El Salvador, and apparently has contributed to a general popular feeling of greater confidence and anticipation about the scheduled March presidential elections. The hope is that with the rightwing death squads lying low, there may be less pre-election political violence than previously expected. (b)(3) NatSecAct

Another positive effect of the military's public warnings about rightwing violence is that they may have driven a greater wedge between the high command and various ultrarightist political leaders who may have hoped to gain some measure of military support in the electoral campaign. In view of the fact that the crackdown has been largely cosmetic, however, the possibility of political collusion between the ultraright and various hardline military officers, as well as a resurgence of death squad activity, cannot be excluded. There may even be a spout of new coup rumors around election time, particularly if it appears that Duarte might be a first-round victor. (b)(3) NatSecAct

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This addendum was prepared by (b)(3) ALA, as a result of perceptions obtained during his recent visit to El Salvador. It contains information available as of 24 January 1984. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle-America Caribbean Division, ALA, (b)(3) CIAAct

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