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Salvador Rebels Make Gains And U.S. Advisers Are Glum

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SAN SALVADOR, Nov. 3 — Leftist insurgents have taken the initiative in the four-year-old civil war, killing more than 800 Salvadoran soldiers in the last two months, capturing 400 and greatly extending the country's contested zone, according to United States military advisers here.

The advisers said that since the summer, when they interpreted a lull in fighting as a sign that the army had improved its fighting ability, the guerrillas had launched attacks against more than 60 towns from central El Salvador to the Honduran border.

The fighting since September, they said, has affected nine of the country's 14 provinces.

Army's Problems Persist

The advisers added that the insurgents often met little resistance from the Salvadoran Army. The army, they said, seemed to be struggling with the same problems that have plagued it over the last four years: low morale, weak logistical support and divisions among its commanders.

Some troops have fled their positions without putting up a fight, the advisers said. As a result, the advisers are now painting a gloomy picture of the country's military situation.

They said guerrilla gains had in effect opened a northern corridor from central El Salvador to the east. Before September, guerrilla forces had to take a roundabout route from their bases in the central province of Cuscatlán to Morazán province in the east. Now they

can move virtually unimpeded straight across northern El Salvador.

Guerrillas More Mobile

Moreover, military advisers said, the guerrillas are more unified, have better intelligence and are much more mobile than they were before the summer, moving in daylight by trucks rather than at night on foot.

"They sure are conducting themselves in a very effective manner," one American adviser said. "The subver-

sives are making one hell of a challenge."

The advisers, many of whom say they are discouraged and anxious to finish their assignments here, have expressed discouragement with the army's inability to overcome its command problems and with setbacks to an operation in San Vicente planned and monitored by the Americans.

"The guerrillas have the initiative now, no one can question that," one adviser said. Another just shook his head in agreement when asked if he would recommend that the United States pursue a political solution more diligently.

In the past, military advisers criticized the army's 24,000 men for staying in their barracks and not patrolling the countryside. Now the complaint is that while they are in the field, they are staying in one place and not pursuing the 7,000 guerrillas or setting ambushes.

The army's tactical deficiencies have been aggravated by political tensions within the high command. American Embassy officials were hoping this week for changes that would eliminate some of the ineffective field and staff commanders as well as some men connected with death squad activities.

But the only changes in orders issued Tuesday were insignificant ones at the junior officer level.

Perhaps most demoralizing to Salvadoran Army officers and American advisers has been two recent battles in which the army showed a distinct unwillingness to put up strong resistance and had difficulty in sending reinforcements.

On Sunday, the guerrillas attacked Tejutepeque, a town of 8,000 people some 37 miles north of the capital. The town was guarded by 180 soldiers, many of whom fled to the nearby town of Ilobasco and changed into civilian clothes, according to military advisers.

"A 180-man unit in a defense position should be able to hold out if they have their positions and stay and fight," one adviser said.

The problem was complicated when two companies sent to reinforce the troops in Tejutepeque were ambushed on the way.

A similar situation evolved on Monday in Ciudad Barrios, a town of 20,000 in the eastern province of San Miguel. The town was defended by some 80 national guardsmen, who fled six hours after the attack began and unwittingly headed toward guerrilla territory.

"It doesn't look like there was much effort to keep the place," another military adviser said.

Reinforcements Pinned Down

Two companies sent to reinforce the national guardsmen were pinned down by an ambush less than a mile from their starting point. The companies were from a battalion that recently returned from six weeks of

training at the new American-staffed training base in Honduras.

Military advisers are further worried because the guerrillas are slowly encroaching on San Vicente, which has been billed as the make-it-or-break-it example of what the Salvadoran military is capable of doing.

The San Vicente program, planned by American military advisers, was designed to show that the army could rid a province of guerrillas and then protect the population while the Government undertook redevelopment programs.

There have been signs of improvement in San Vicente since the plan began in June, but already two towns have been attacked and many of the guerrillas who left before the offensive began have returned.