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Cuba Eying Latin 'Tet,' U.S. Says

Autumn Offensive Might Be Factor in Presidential Race

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Cuba has decided to roughly double the guerrilla striking force in El Salvador in hopes of mounting a "Tet-like" offensive there during the U.S. presidential race this fall, White House national security affairs adviser Robert C. McFarlane charged yesterday.

Even the prospect of such an offensive at a crucial point this fall has political significance here. In the past several weeks, the Reagan administration has been discussing a possible fall offensive in El Salvador in confidential congressional briefings supporting its program of military and economic aid to that country. An actual offensive, including the possibility of U.S. military involvement or retaliation, could be an unpredictable factor in the presidential race.

McFarlane, appearing on "Meet the Press" (NBC, WRC), declined to provide details to back up his charge except to say that it is based on "evidence that accumulated in the past six weeks" and that "our community of intelligence experts finds it very credible."

A senior administration official, who asked not to be quoted by name, said reports reaching Washington early last month indicated that Cuban President Fidel Castro decided to increase greatly the level of recruiting, supply and advice to the anti-government guerrillas in El Salvador, currently estimated at 10,000 to 12,000.

Another official who is familiar with the intelligence said some reports suggested that larger numbers of Salvadoran guerrillas are undergoing training in Cuba and Nicaragua. It is "too early to tell" whether a large-scale increase in guerrilla forces and their effectiveness can be carried out, but "there are pretty good indications that this is the game plan," the official said.

The number of leftist guerrillas in El Salvador was estimated at about 2,000 in 1980, on the eve of the Reagan administration's assumption of power. By May, 1983, the official U.S. estimate published by the State Department had grown to 4,000 to 6,000 full-time guerrillas plus 5,000 to 10,000 "part-time activists."

Last January, the Defense Department began using the figures 8,000 to 9,000 for the full-time guerrilla force in El Salvador. In February the State Department said "combat-equipped" guerrilla personnel had risen to 9,000 to 11,000.

In recent weeks, the figure of 10,000 to 12,000 full-time guerrillas

has been used. It is this number that is expected to be roughly doubled, along with an upgrading of weapons and equipment, in the months ahead, an administration official said yesterday.

On the government side, the Salvadoran army has risen from 16,000 men in 1980 to about 39,000 full-time troops this year, according to State Department figures. McFarlane said on the television program that "we believe honestly that the only way the Salvadoran government is going to be able to deal with [an offensive] is to prepare the army in terms of training and equipment and so forth to be able to preempt it."

No Cuban combat forces are believed to be in El Salvador, but unspecified numbers of Cuban military advisers are thought to be on the scene, according to an administration official. Two Cuban generals reportedly are in Nicaragua, one of whom is said to assist the Salvadoran insurgency full time, the official added.

Government sources said that in referring to a possible "Tet-like" offensive in El Salvador, the term used in briefings for members of Congress, they did not mean to forecast military action on the scale of the 1968 offensive in South Vietnam, when an estimated

67,000 communist troops launched simultaneous surprise attacks against nearly every city and provincial capital, in the face of 1.1 million U.S. and South Vietnamese defenders.

"What we are talking about is an offensive with an enormous psychological impact, one that could turn the course of the war," an official said.

The pattern of warfare in El Salvador has been for greater guerrilla activity and offensives in the late fall and winter months, apparently due to more favorable weather.

Several officials said the available evidence

points to larger battles this year in September and October, which would be earlier than usual. Officials said they assume that the intention on the communist side is to bring the military situation in El Salvador to a head while the presidential campaign in the United States places the Reagan administration in a difficult and vulnerable position.