

American Killed in El Salvador

Attack on Base Part of New Drive, Guerrillas Say

By William Branigin
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAN SALVADOR, March 31—
Leftist guerrillas assaulted an Army garrison early today, killing at least 42 Salvadoran soldiers and an American military adviser in a major attack that the rebels said was the start of a new offensive.

The attack began shortly before 2 a.m. when a large guerrilla force fired mortars and rockets at the 4th Infantry Brigade headquarters at El Paraiso, about 30 miles north of here in the northern province of Chalatenango.

The Salvadoran military said at least 43 soldiers were killed in the attack, including the U.S. military adviser, the first killed in combat in the civil war here. The U.S. Embassy identified the adviser as Staff Sgt. Gregory Fronius, 27, of Painesville, Ohio, who had been attached to the 7th Special Forces at the U.S. Southern Command in Panama. The Pentagon, which said his hometown was Greensburg, Pa., said he was married and had one child.

Fronius was awakened by the attack, and was killed when he ran out of his quarters near the base's Regional Intelligence Center, U.S. sources said. They said he was gunned down by small-arms fire, then hit by a mortar round.

The Pentagon said Fronius had grabbed his personal weapon and was killed "while defending himself."

The number of U.S. military advisers stationed in El Salvador is kept at 55 or fewer.

The mountainous northern zone near the border with Honduras has long been considered a stronghold

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of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), which has been waging an insurgency against the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government for seven years.

The Salvadoran Army said 35 soldiers were wounded in the assault on the garrison, which was manned by about 250 troops.

Armed forces chief Gen. Adolfo Blandon, said the death toll could rise, and witnesses said they believed the fighting caused considerably more military casualties than have been reported. Diplomatic sources also said they believed the Salvadoran military's casualty figures were low.

Reporters who visited the camp today counted eight rebel dead.

It was not immediately known precisely how many guerrillas were involved in the attack. Estimates ranged from 100 to more than 500. Diplomatic sources said the assault appeared to follow rebel plans, captured earlier by the military, that called for well organized attacks by fewer than 100 highly trained sappers following mortar and rocket barrages.

Salvadoran Army officers said that at least three guerrilla infiltrators among the troops in the garrison had been instrumental in the success of the attack. They said the rebels had carried satchel charges and that some appeared to have been killed by their own explosives.

"The attack illustrates the point that it's very wrong to underestimate the capabilities of the FMLN," a European diplomat said. "They are not a finished force."

He added, "I don't think it signifies the beginning of a grand offensive or that the FMLN has reinforced its strength. It's just another of those reminders that they retain a military capability."

The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, in a radio broadcast, said its attack had caused 600 military casualties. However, two officers whom the rebels claimed to have killed, the brigade commander and his deputy, later spoke to reporters. The brigade commander, Col. Gilberto Rubio, was slightly wounded.

The rebel broadcast called the attack "a strong blow to the armed forces" and said it marked the start of an offensive to capture power from the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

According to the armed forces press office, the fighting lasted about three hours, ending at 5 a.m. Air Force planes and helicopter gunships strafed the rebels to repel the attack, the press office said.

Witnesses said two barracks, the camp's command post, a motor pool and an ammunition dump were among the facilities destroyed.

Many of the dead soldiers' bodies were charred, apparently from fires that raged inside the camp.

The military press office said the soldiers were killed "heroically defending the installations." There was no immediate explanation of how the rebels, who are estimated to number about 6,000 throughout the country, were able to mass a force estimated at several hundred fighters and carry their attack inside the well defended camp.

The rebels said in their radio broadcast today that they simultaneously carried out three other attacks—in the provinces of Cuscatlan, San Vicente and Usulután. There was no immediate word from the military about the attacks.

U.S. Embassy spokesman Pendleton Agnew said Fronius and his partner were stationed at El Paraiso to train Salvadoran infantrymen.

Pentagon spokesman Robert Sims said in Washington that the partner, who was not identified, was not at the garrison when the rebels attacked.

Agnew said the advisers' presence at El Paraiso was within guidelines established by Congress prohibiting U.S. soldiers in El Salvador from participating in combat. He said El Paraiso was one of several "carefully selected" garrisons outside San Salvador that the embassy views as well enough defended to make combat danger to advisers unlikely.

"We can't preclude every possibility," Agnew said.

It was the second time guerrillas had crippled the El Paraiso garrison. A similar nighttime artillery attack on Dec. 30, 1983, reduced it to smoldering rubble and killed more than 100 sleeping Salvadoran soldiers, whose bodies were hastily in-

tered in a mass grave. The base was rebuilt with U.S. military aid funds and U.S. officials said its perimeter defenses had been improved.

In an interview in Managua, Nicaragua, a civilian leader of the guerrilla alliance, Ruben Zamora, said the attack was part of a nationwide military operation. He said the guerrillas are changing their tactics to deploy larger elite assault units instead of small patrols.

Fronius was the second American to die in the country in a week. The State Department said today that pilot error apparently caused the crash Thursday of a Salvadoran military helicopter that killed a CIA employe near the town of Chinameca.

Five other members of the U.S. military are known to have been killed in El Salvador since the start of the civil war.

The first was Navy Lt. Cmdr. Albert Schaufelberger III, 32. He was shot in San Salvador May 25, 1983, as he sat in a parked car, waiting for a friend. A leftist rebel group claimed responsibility. He headed a six-man military group responsible for managing U.S. aid to El Salvador.

Four U.S. Marine guards were killed June 19, 1985, in an attack on an outdoor cafe in San Salvador. Leftist guerrillas claimed responsibility.

Washington Post correspondent Julia Preston in Managua and staff writer Molly Moore in Washington contributed to this report.



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