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Salvadoran defector aids loyalist intelligence

By Tom Diaz
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A top Marxist rebel commander in El Salvador defected to the government last month and is giving intelligence officers valuable information about rebel operations, several informed U.S. government sources said yesterday.

"I understand his information looks quite useful," one source said.

Napoleon Romero, a former student leader, fought for the rebel Peoples Forces of Liberation army under the name of "Comandante Miguel Castellanos." He was originally reported to have been captured by Salvadoran army troops April 11.

However, he later told a press conference in El Salvador that he had turned himself in to the government because he had lost faith in violence as a means of solving the country's problems.

Mr. Romero's defection and cooperation mark the second serious intelligence setback for the rebel forces within a month. A Salvadoran army unit also captured another top rebel commander on April 18, along with boxloads of rebel military and political plans.

However, that commander, Nidia Diaz, has refused to cooperate with interrogators, according to sources.

"She's not being very helpful at all," one source said. "She is described as having 'all the charm of a trapped rat.'"

Another source said that the government has Miss Diaz under round-the-clock watch because authorities fear that she will attempt suicide.

Miss Diaz, a leader of the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers, another Salvadoran rebel group, was one of the representatives to peace talks with the government last October.

"They [the Salvadorans] not only have the defector, but they have captured several top leaders, and they have lots of documents with information about the guerrillas' operational plans," one senior administration official said.

He added that the information about the rebels' plans and operations "should be coming out soon,"

but declined to discuss the matter in any further detail, saying it was up to the government of El Salvador to release the information.

But the official said the Salvadoran government is winning its war against the Marxist rebels.

"The insurgency is waning, it's being defeated," the official said. "They [the rebels] don't have the support they used to have."

Mr. Romero told a press conference in San Salvador last month that strife within the People's Liberation Forces resulted in the murder of one high official by another.

It is believed that the United States government may be holding back on releasing information it knows that he has provided for several reasons, among them not wanting to let rebel forces know how much is known about their plans and operations, deference to the Salvadoran government, and a desire not to "hype" the defection.

Even though Miss Diaz is refusing to cooperate, Salvadoran troops bagged a windfall cache of documents when she was captured.

Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte described the circumstances of her capture at a press conference in San Salvador earlier this month, the details of which were not reported in the United States.

He said a government helicopter was flying a training mission, using new infrared surveillance equipment. Such equipment can

pick up images from fires and other sources of heat, such as engines.

President Duarte said the troops in the helicopter "saw the fire and two wounded persons," then discovered one of the two was a woman, Miss Diaz.

"Perhaps the thing that worries them [the rebels] most is the amount of information we found with her," he said. "She had boxes full of all their general, military and political plans when we found her."

"They were apparently transferring their center of operations and were carrying boxes and knapsacks full of all kinds of documents," he said. "These documents are now being studied from the military and political standpoint to evaluate them and see what their contents are."

The rebel forces at first hailed both Mr. Romero and Miss Diaz as having "fallen in the struggle against the dictatorship," and denied that Mr. Romero had defected. The clandestine rebel Radio Farabundo Marti issued a communique April 25 demanding a "halt to the pressures" it alleged the government was exerting against Mr. Romero and Miss Diaz, and warning that it held President Duarte "responsible for the life and safety of our companeros."

But a few weeks later, on May 6, rebel forces called local news media in San Salvador and announced Mr. Romero's "dismissal," describing him as a "traitor" who "betrayed the guerrillas."