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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE
13 May 1987

El Salvador: Implications of the Guerrilla Attack at El Paraiso

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Summary

The successful attack by Salvadoran insurgents at El Paraiso accomplished an important guerrilla objective by focusing international attention on an insurgency that has seen its fortunes wane in recent years, but the Army retains the upper hand and the battlefield initiative. As in previous spectacular successes--which have occurred at about nine-month intervals since 1985--the rebel assault demonstrated glaring deficiencies in the military's security, intelligence and leadership capabilities. We believe the insurgents will score similar successes from time to time, in part because the High Command has done little to improve security at key installations or to discipline senior officers guilty of negligence. We judge, however, that the guerrillas are unlikely to stage a sustained campaign of large-scale attacks because of the need for extensive planning and preparation as well as the high risk to their elite commando units. So long as reversals like El Paraiso occur infrequently the course of the war is not likely to shift in favor of the insurgents.

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Middle American-Caribbean Division, ALA [Redacted]

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Like earlier guerrilla attacks on the military training center at La Union in November 1985 and 3rd Brigade headquarters at San Miguel in June 1986, the assault on 4th Brigade headquarters at El Paraiso on 30 March was well planned and executed. [redacted]

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[redacted] the rebels had precise intelligence provided by infiltrators on key buildings inside the compound. The assault was spearheaded by a small number of guerrilla sappers--out of an attacking force of some 150 men--who were able to penetrate carefully prepared perimeter defenses, including mines and barbed wire, without casualties. The US Embassy believes the guerrillas' sophisticated and coordinated use of mortar and rocket fire--tactics not employed in the attacks at La Union and San Miguel--suggests the assault force may have had Nicaraguan or Cuban training. [redacted]

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Poor security practices, weak leadership, and questionable tactics by government troops also played a major role in the guerrillas' success. The garrison at El Paraiso was caught off guard when it failed to deploy adequate reconnaissance patrols, [redacted] and some guards were asleep when the insurgents struck. Brigade officers failed to check on sentries during the night, and guards who remained alert were either killed quickly or had no means of direct communication with their superiors. In the earlier attacks at La Union and San Miguel, the insurgents took advantage of poorly maintained base perimeters to breach the defenses. Inadequate counterintelligence procedures are believed to have enabled the insurgents to infiltrate agents posing as government troops well in advance of all three attacks. [redacted]

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Temporary Propaganda Payoffs

The guerrillas' primary rationale in launching these spectacular operations, in our opinion, is to create the impression for propaganda purposes that they are a potent military force. [redacted]

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[redacted] By staging large-scale attacks periodically--one successful attack about every nine months since 1985--the rebels divert attention from the more substantive government advances in counterinsurgency operations. Moreover, the guerrillas probably hope such assaults eventually will spark urban anti-government dissatisfaction with a seemingly endless war and force the government into powersharing negotiations. [redacted]

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The advantages gained by the guerrillas in overrunning military garrisons have tended to dissipate quickly. US Embassy reporting indicates that the attacks have not resulted in increased popular or international support for the rebels, and international press coverage of the insurgency has quickly subsided. Lacking the ability to sustain military pressure, the guerrillas invariably have reverted to low-level ambushes and economic sabotage, thereby losing their propaganda advantage.

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More Spectaculars Likely

We believe the guerrillas will be able to repeat such spectacular actions from time to time, largely because of Army deficiencies. Despite the formation of several military commissions to investigate and redress shortcomings at key installations, few substantive procedural changes have resulted. The three major attacks since 1985 have demonstrated that certain Army commanders have been slow to learn from their colleagues' mistakes and that the guerrillas are quick to exploit weaknesses. In our judgment, the unwillingness of the High Command to discipline or replace mediocre field commanders contributes significantly to the complaisant attitude and attendant morale problems that have led to guerrilla success.

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We believe several factors, however, will prevent the insurgents from sustaining pressure on the Armed Forces through large-scale attacks.

- [redacted] that considerable time is needed for planning and training. [redacted] preparations for a planned attack against the lightly defended international airport late last year--cancelled after the Army found out and took precautions--lasted for at least two months and included intensive map studies, mockups, and field rehearsals by specialized troops.
- Guerrilla concerns about Army intelligence and tightened security complicate planning and probably cause them to delay or abort some operations.
- The guerrillas cannot easily replace losses to the highly trained and motivated elite units that conduct the assaults. [redacted] estimated that as many as

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half of the elite sappers who attacked San Miguel and La Union were killed. The eight to ten guerrillas killed at El Paraiso probably represent one third of the estimated number of special forces that penetrated the perimeter.

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Net Assessment

On balance, periodic reversals such as El Paraiso will not change the course of the war, in our opinion. The armed forces retain the battlefield initiative, and the guerrillas remain on the defensive, relying largely on economic sabotage and terrorism to prolong the war. Lacking the resources to follow up with significant and sustained military pressure, we doubt the guerrillas can accomplish their key strategic objectives--driving the armed forces into a garrison-bound, defensive posture and forcing the government into powersharing negotiations. Previous attacks have demonstrated the Army can replace its losses and resume aggressive counterinsurgency operations quickly.

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