

EL SALVADOR:

Military Unease Growing

*Salvadoran military leaders face discontent within the military over the perceived lack of official response to rebel peace initiatives and recent criticism from Washington of the military's human rights record.*

Armed Forces Chief Ponce recently met with Defense Minister Vides and First Vice-President-designate Rodriguez—a close adviser to ailing President Duarte—to offer the military's help in formulating a political strategy to take the political initiative from the guerrillas.

Vides urged that the government devise a coherent position on the guerrillas' peace proposals, one he could take to the troops, whom he described as increasingly restive over the government's apparent confusion. During the recent Central American summit, Vides warned Presidents Arias of Costa Rica and Ortega of Nicaragua that pressing San Salvador to postpone the presidential election scheduled for 19 March would precipitate a coup.

Some segments of the armed forces—particularly junior officers—are angry over recent US warnings on human rights.

Colonel Ponce is under pressure from officers of all ranks to ignore the possibility that the US was curtailing military assistance. Ponce believes criticism of human rights abuses has begun to erode the armed forces' confidence in continued US support. Some officers believe Washington supports the Christian Democrats in the presidential election and will halt aid if the rightist ARENA party wins.

Comment: Senior officers probably believe public warnings of a coup will dissuade the government from accepting the rebel proposal to postpone the election beyond the constitutional limit, which the Defense Minister believes is 31 March. Although no significant steps have been taken to delay the balloting, postponing it beyond constitutional limits, particularly if civilian leaders continue to appear indecisive and reactive, would increase the chances for military intervention. Senior officers, understanding the importance of US aid to the war effort, will probably be able to contain discontent over the human rights criticisms.

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