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EL SALVADOR: DEATHS OF THE DUTCH JOURNALISTS

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EL SALVADOR: DEATHS OF THE DUTCH JOURNALISTS

1. [Redacted] THE MID-MARCH DEATHS OF FOUR DUTCH JOURNALISTS IN EL SALVADOR WERE THE RESULT OF A CHANCE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN SALVADORAN ARMY TROOPS AND THE GUERRILLA GROUP WITH WHICH THE JOURNALISTS WERE TRAVELLING. WHILE PRIVATELY BLAMING THE CARELESSNESS OF THE GUERRILLA GUIDE FOR THE INCIDENT, FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION THE GUERRILLAS IMMEDIATELY LAUNCHED A CAMPAIGN TO LAY BLAME FOR THE JOURNALISTS' DEATHS ON THE DUARTE ADMINISTRATION AND THE SALVADORAN HIGH COMMAND.

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THE FIREFIGHT

2. EARLY ON THE MORNING OF WEDNESDAY MARCH 17TH, A 25-MAN SALVADORAN ARMY PATROL LEFT BASE TO INVESTIGATE REPORTS THAT GUERRILLAS WERE USING A NEARBY SETTLEMENT AS A SUPPLY DEPOT. THE SETTLEMENT, TASAJERA, LIES ABANDONED ABOUT 6 KILOMETERS FROM THE SALVADORAN ARMY BASE AT EL PARAISO.

3. THE SALVADORAN SOLDIERS PATROLLED NEAR TASAJERA UNTIL ABOUT 1800 HOURS. THEY WERE RETURNING TO BASE WHEN THEY ENCOUNTERED A GUERRILLA GROUP AND A FIREFIGHT ENSUED.

4. WHEN THE GUERRILLAS WITHDREW, THEY LEFT BEHIND EIGHT BODIES AND TWO RIFLES. THREE OF THE DEAD WERE GUERRILLAS, SALVADORAN MALES IN THEIR LATE TEENS. A FOURTH MAN, SUSPECTED OF BEING A GUERRILLA AS WELL, WAS ABOUT SIX FEET TALL, HEAVYSET, AND DID NOT APPEAR TO

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HAVE LATIN FEATURES. HE CARRIED NO DOCUMENTATION AND IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IDENTIFY HIM FURTHER. THE REMAINING FOUR CASUALTIES WERE THE JOURNALISTS, IDENTIFIED FROM THEIR PASSPORTS AS JACOBUS ANDRIES KOSTER, JAN CORNELIS KUIPER, HANS LODEWIJK TER LAAG, AND JOHANNES JAN WILLEMSSEN, ALL DUTCH CITIZENS.

5. ON-SITE INVESTIGATORS INDEPENDENT OF THE SALVADORAN GOVERNMENT REPORT THAT ALL OF THE DEAD HAD DIED FROM MULTIPLE GUNSHOT WOUNDS, APPARENTLY FIRED FROM M-16'S AND IN TWO CASES POSSIBLY M-60 MACHINE GUNS. THE FATAL SHOTS APPEARED TO HAVE BEEN FIRED FROM A DISTANCE; THEY WERE NOT FIRED AT EXTREME CLOSE RANGE.

6. AS A RESULT OF THEIR EXAMINATION OF THE DEAD, INSPECTION OF THE BATTLE SITE, AND INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF THE SALVADORAN ARMY PATROL INVOLVED IN THE FIREFIGHT, THE OBSERVERS CONCLUDED THAT THE JOURNALISTS DIED OF MULTIPLE GUNSHOT WOUNDS RECEIVED DURING AN ENCOUNTER WITH SOLDIERS OF THE "ATONAL" BATTALION WHILE ATTEMPTING TO ENTER GUERRILLA TERRITORY SURREPTITIOUSLY IN THE COMPANY OF GUIDES IDENTIFIED BY SALVADORAN ARMED FORCES AS GUERRILLAS.

AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE.

7. THE SALVADORAN SOLDIERS ARRIVED BACK AT THEIR BASE AROUND 2000 HOURS ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17TH. ON THE MORNING OF THE 18TH, THE SALVADORAN HIGH COMMAND NOTIFIED THE DUTCH CONSUL OF THE DEATHS OF THE FOUR JOURNALISTS. SALVADORAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS FROM THE CAPITAL AND INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS IMMEDIATELY BEGAN SEPARATE INVESTIGATIONS AT THE SCENE OF THE INCIDENT.

8. IN THE MEANTIME, RUMORS OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED BEGAN TO CIRCULATE THROUGH THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS CORPS THAT WAS IN SAN SALVADOR TO COVER THE ELECTIONS. SKETCHY EARLY REPORTS BEGAN TO ARRIVE IN WESTERN EUROPE LATE IN THE EVENING OF THURSDAY, MARCH 18TH. MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE INCIDENT QUICKLY EXTENDED BEYOND THE FACTS AVAILABLE. IN PART THIS REFLECTED COMPETITION AMONG THE HUNDREDS OF FOREIGN JOURNALISTS IN EL SALVADOR AT THE TIME. BEYOND THIS, HOWEVER, THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THE PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN INITIATED BY THE GUERRILLAS INFLUENCED THE CONTENT OF NEWS STORIES BEING REPORTED IN WESTERN EUROPE AND THAT THE SOVIET UNION WAS USING THE INCIDENT TO DAMAGE U.S.-DUTCH RELATIONS.

9. FRIDAY MORNING EDITIONS OF NEWSPAPERS IN THE NETHERLANDS GAVE FRONT PAGE COVERAGE TO THE STORY. MOST OF THEM GAVE FACTUAL ACCOUNTS OF WHAT WAS KNOWN AT THAT TIME. THE NEWSPAPER, "TROUW," HOWEVER, CARRIED A REPORT FROM SAN SALVADOR BY JAN SCHMEITZ THAT ASSERTED THAT THE FOUR WERE LURED INTO AN AMBUSH BY GOVERNMENT TROOPS, ARRESTED, AND KILLED.

10. BY MID-AFTERNOON ON FRIDAY, "TASS" WAS BROADCASTING IN ENGLISH FROM MOSCOW THAT "AN AMBUSH WAS LAID FOR THE JOURNALISTS NEAR THE SETTLEMENT OF PARAISO WHERE THEY WERE SHOT POINT BLANK." AMONG THE FACTS "PROVING" THAT THE JOURNALISTS WERE "MURDERED" TASS MENTIONED THE PROXIMITY OF A "MAJOR MILITARY BASE WHERE 'EXPERTS' FROM AMONG U.S. GREEN BERETS ARE TRAINING SALVADORAN PUNITIVE TROOPS." AT THE SAME TIME, IN EL SALVADOR, THE GUERRILLA STATION "RADIO FARABUNDO MARTI," WAS REPORTING FALSELY IN SPANISH THAT "THE ARMED FORCES HAVE ADMITTED THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ASSASSINATION OF FOUR DUTCH NEWSMEN ON 16 (SIC) MARCH."

11. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] THE NAMES OF THE FOUR DUTCH JOURNALISTS HAD NOT APPEARED ON A "DEATH LIST" THAT CIRCULATED IN SAN SALVADOR THE WEEK BEFORE, ALLEGEDLY ISSUED BY THE FAR RIGHT. THE "RADIO FARABUNDO MARTI" BROADCAST THUS CONTINUED: "THE MEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATHS OF THE FOUR DUTCH NEWSMEN, ALONG WITH THOSE OF THE OTHER CIVILIANS WITH THEM, ARE COLONEL ADALBERTO REYES MENA, THE COMMANDER OF THE EL PARAISO MILITARY GARRISON IN CHALATENANGO, AND OTHER OFFICERS OF THAT GENOCIDAL GARRISON."

12. LATE IN THE EVENING OF FRIDAY THE 19TH, A SECOND GUERRILLA STATION, "RADIO VENCEREMOS," BROADCAST ALONG SIMILAR LINES, CLAIMING

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THAT "THE REGIME HAS ORDERED THE KILLING OF FOUR NEWSMEN." IN AN INTERESTING DEPARTURE FROM PREVIOUS REPORTING, THE "RADIO VENCEREMOS" BROADCAST WENT ON TO DENY THAT THE JOURNALISTS WERE IN SOME SIGNIFICANT SENSE "LINKED" WITH THE GUERRILLAS -- THUS REPLYING TO AN ACCUSATION THAT NO ONE ELSE HAD MADE.

13. MEANWHILE, IN THE NETHERLANDS, A "DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIVE" OF THE FMLN, GERMAN AVALOS, TOLD THE MEDIA THAT THE FOUR JOURNALISTS WERE MURDERED. AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE SELF-STYLED "COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN EL SALVADOR" (CDHES), MARIANELLA GARCIA, ON A VISIT TO THE NETHERLANDS, ALSO TOLD REPORTERS THAT THE FOUR WERE MURDERED BY EL SALVADORAN MILITARY FORCES.

14. ON MONDAY THE 22ND, THE GERMAN LEFT-CENTER NEWSPAPER, "FRANKFURTER RUNDSCHAU," WROTE THAT THE DEATHS OF THE FOUR DUTCH NEWSMEN "COULD NOT HAVE BEEN PLANNED AND CARRIED OUT WITHOUT PERMISSION BY DEFENSE MINISTER JOSE GUILLERMO GARCIA." AND, FURTHER, THAT "THE ASSAULT ON THE NEWSMEN BENEFITS, OF COURSE, THE RIGHTIST EXTREMISTS AND THE JUNTA." "STUTTGARTER ZEITUNG" WAS LESS OBLIQUE: "THE RIGHTIST TERRORIST SQUADS AND PROBABLY ALSO THE NATIONAL GUARD AND THE RIGHTIST MILITARY TOOK ACTION TO GET RID OF THE WITNESSES OF THE BLOODY SLAUGHTER FOR WHICH THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE."

15. FINALLY, ONE OF THE MOST FLAGRANT ATTEMPTS TO EXPLOIT THE INCIDENT HAS THE EARMARKS OF A SOVIET ACTIVE MEASURES OPERATION: ON MONDAY THE 22ND, THE DUTCH NEWSPAPER, "VOLKSKRANT," PUBLISHED A STORY BY JAN VAN DER PUTTEN, ITS MEXICO CITY CORRESPONDENT, THAT BEGAN: "A HIGH-RANKING OFFICIAL OF THE AMERICAN EMBASSY IN SAN SALVADOR, WHO HAS ACCESS TO THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES OF THE GOVERNMENT AND THE ARMY OF EL SALVADOR, REVEALED IN A CONVERSATION WITH FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS THAT 'THE SOLDIERS WERE WAITING FOR THE DUTCHMEN IN THE HILLS. THERE IS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT THAT THEY WALKED INTO AN AMBUSH.'"

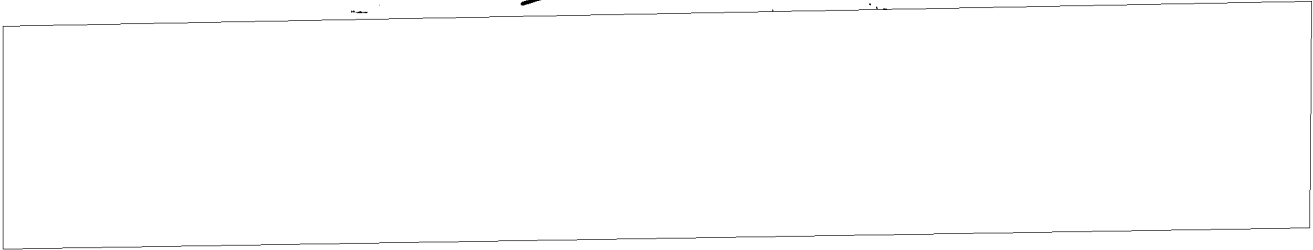
16. ONE DAY LATER, "TASS" BEGAN REPLAYING THE VAN DER PUTTEN STORY, WITH ITS OWN ELABORATIONS. BY NOW "SECRET SERVICE MEN" WERE ALLEGED TO HAVE "HUNTED" THE DUTCHMEN "FOR A LONG TIME, LURED THEM INTO A TRAP AND SHOT THEM IN COLD BLOOD." FALSELY CLAIMING THAT THIS STATEMENT HAD BEEN PRINTED IN ALL MAJOR DUTCH NEWSPAPERS, THE "TASS" REPORT CONCLUDED BY ASSERTING THAT THESE EVENTS "SHED LIGHT ON THE U.S. ROLE IN EL SALVADOR."

17. THREE POINTS HELP TO PUT THESE EVENTS IN PERSPECTIVE. FIRST, THE REPORTER WHO ORIGINATED THE STORY, VAN DER PUTTEN, HAD RECENTLY FILED ANOTHER FALSE STORY -- CONCERNING THE PRESENCE OF DUTCH SHIPS IN A NATO MARITIME EXERCISE -- THAT HAD PRECIPITATED A FUROR IN THE NETHERLANDS OVER U.S. POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL AMERICA. SECOND, THE TIMING OF EVENTS ON THE DAY OF THE JOURNALISTS' DEATHS SHOWS THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE SALVADORAN SOLDIERS TO HAVE HAD ADVANCE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE JOURNALISTS WERE COMING -- AND THUS REFUTES THE ENTRAPMENT THEORY. THAT IS, THE SOLDIERS OF THE SALVADORAN ARMY PATROL HAD BEEN IN THE FIELD SINCE BEFORE DAWN, HAD BEEN OUT OF TOUCH WITH THEIR BASE ALL DAY, AND WERE NEAR THE ROAD THAT THE JOURNALISTS DROVE IN ON ONLY BECAUSE IT WAS TIME FOR THEM TO RETURN TO GARRISON. THE REPORTERS THEMSELVES DID NOT LEAVE SAN SALVADOR UNTIL 3:45 PM -- MORE THAN EIGHT HOURS AFTER THE ARMY PATROL HAD BROKEN COMMUNICATIONS CONTACT WITH ITS BASE. FURTHERMORE THE REPORTERS TOOK PAINS TO CONCEAL THEIR INTENTIONS. UPON LEAVING THEIR HOTEL, THE REPORTERS HAD SAID THEY WERE DRIVING TO TEGUCIGALPA, HONDURAS; SOME 200 KILOMETERS AWAY FROM THEIR ACTUAL DESTINATION. BY HEADING EAST ON THE PANAMERICAN HIGHWAY THEIR TRUE DESTINATION COULD HAVE BEEN KEPT HIDDEN UNTIL THEY TURNED NORTH SOME 15 TO 30 KILOMETERS OUT OF THE CAPITAL. AS A FURTHER STEP TO CONCEAL THEIR PLANS, THE JOURNALISTS SWITCHED VEHICLES FOR THE TRIP, TRAVELLING FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A GREEN VAN INSTEAD OF THE YELLOW CAR THEY HAD USED FOR THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF THEIR STAY IN EL SALVADOR. THIRD AND MOST IMPORTANT, INTELLIGENCE REPORTING ON THE NATURE OF THE JOURNALISTS' DEATHS AND ON GUERRILLA PLANS TO EXPLOIT THE SITUATION CLEARLY DEMONSTRATES THE FALSITY OF THE VAN DER PUTTEN STORY AND THE PROPAGANDISTIC NATURE OF ITS TIMING AND DISTRIBUTION.

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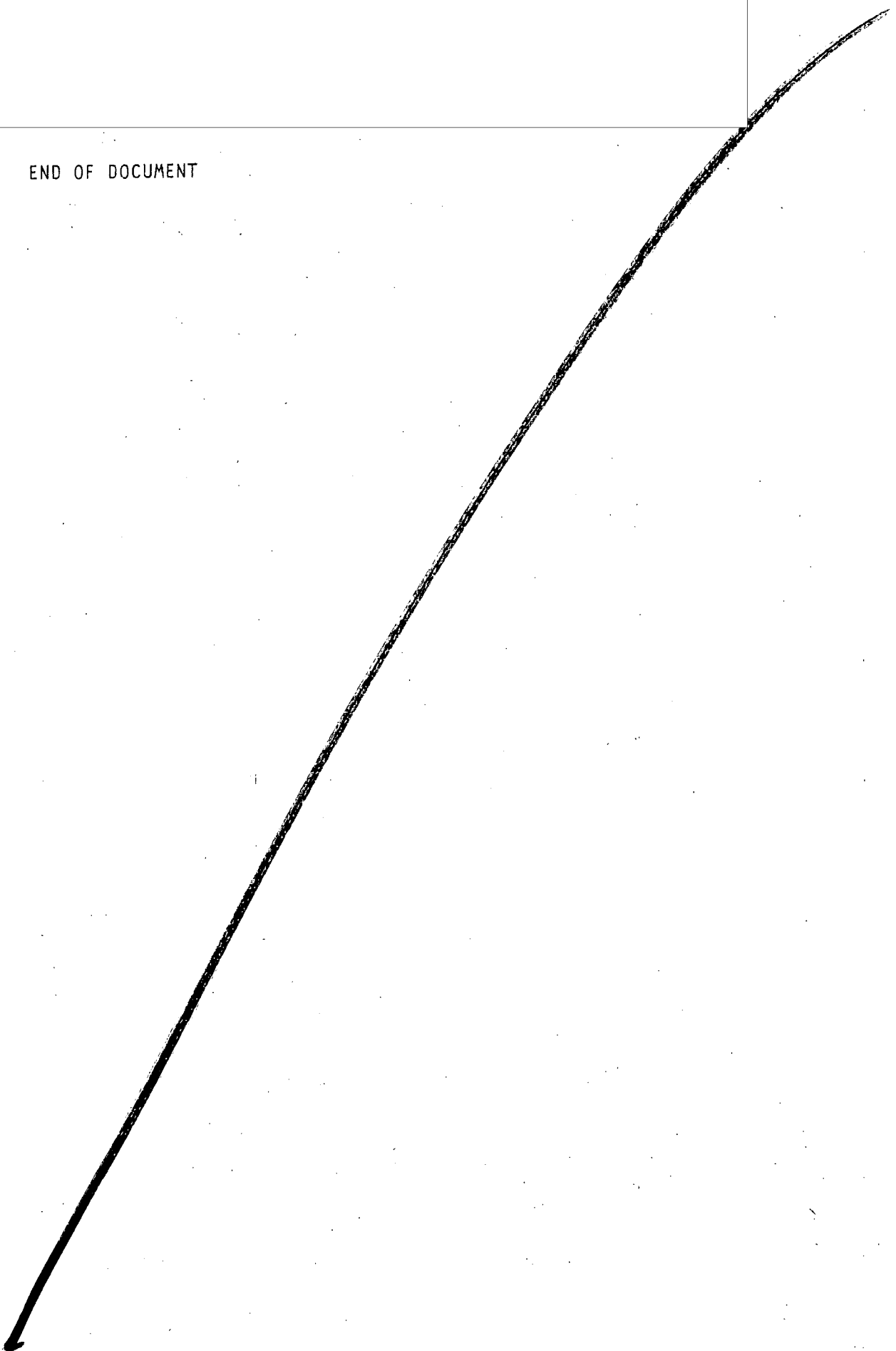
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