

EL SALVADOR:

Faced With Human Rights Concerns

Charges of government repression, particularly allegations of military complicity in the murders last week of six Jesuit priests, confront President Cristiani with his greatest political challenge to date; his administration's credibility depends on a quick and thorough investigation and successful prosecution of the guilty parties.

Cristiani has publicly condemned the murders and has promised to punish the killers, even if they include members of the armed forces. An investigation is under way, and the government has requested assistance from law enforcement agencies in the US, the UK, and Spain.

Although no hard information on the identity of the killers is available, a wide range of groups have already blamed the government. says alleged eyewitnesses to the murders have not come forth. Meanwhile, the rebels have accused the military of causing civilian casualties by indiscriminate aerial attacks.

Comment: The murder of the priests threatens to overshadow other issues in El Salvador, including the rebels' responsibility for starting the offensive and their inability to spark an insurrection or reach any of their military objectives. Even if the killers are identified, the limitations of El Salvador's legal system, such as restrictions on using certain types of evidence and the vulnerability of judges to bribery or intimidation, probably will hamper a successful prosecution. If Roberto D'Aubuisson, a popular and well-connected figure in rightwing Salvadoran politics, is involved in the killings as indicate, Cristiani probably also will face great political pressure to protect D'Aubuisson, regardless of concerns about continued US aid. It is highly unlikely Cristiani or senior military leaders are involved.

Charges that the armed forces have indiscriminately attacked civilian areas appear exaggerated. personnel who toured the neighborhoods where most of the fighting occurred say there is no evidence of indiscriminate bombing by the Air Force, which apparently adhered to strict guidelines from the political and military leadership. Nonetheless, the government probably has underestimated civilian casualties—whether caused by the military or the rebels.

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