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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
16 September 1963

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CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Terrorism in Venezuela

The Nature of the Threat

1. Intensive terrorist activity continues to threaten the stability of the Betancourt government, and if not soon checked could undermine democratic government in Venezuela. The terrorists have a threefold objective. By weakening public confidence in democratic processes, they hope to reduce popular participation in the national election, which must be held no later than 1 December 1963. Secondly, they hope to provoke the government into strong repressive measures, thereby giving substance to their claim that it is dictatorial. Finally, they believe that the government's inability to control terrorism may tempt military leaders to mount a coup against Betancourt, which the Communists would attempt to exploit to gain influence.

2. The major threat is from Communist and Castroist forces hoping to reshape Venezuela along the lines of Castro's Cuba. These forces are aligned in the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the FALN, its paramilitary subsidiary. The Castroist groups which participate in the FLN, most notably the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), often initiate terrorist activities on their own. The FLN at times engages in tactical alliances with rightist plotters.

3. The terrorists are resourceful and ably led, if limited in numbers. The FALN is estimated to have a maximum of 200 terrorists in Caracas and some 300 to 400 elsewhere in the country, including those in rural-based guerrilla bands. For the most part, members are recruited from among urban youth.

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Terrorist Operations

4. In May and June 1963, it was reported that the FALN terrorists had decided to concentrate on attacking US interests because they felt they were alienating themselves from the masses by attacking Venezuelan targets. Although there have been some attacks on bridges, on gas and oil lines, and on Venezuelan police and military personnel, the majority of the terrorist activities have been against American targets. They have, however, refrained from personal violence to US officials.

5. Recently, however, the terrorists have turned to political targets, and on 13 September attempted to break up a meeting of Betancourt's Democratic Action (AD) party in Caracas held to observe the party's 22nd anniversary. They exploded home-made bombs in various parts of the city, strewed tacks downtown to puncture tires, burned cars and carried out hit-and-run shootings. These incidents failed to disrupt the AD rally completely, but attendance was only about half of what had been expected.

6. FALN spokesmen have several times indicated their intention to kidnap the US Ambassador and possibly other US Embassy personnel. There have been several reports that such acts are in fact being planned. Since July, the government has furnished special security guards for the Ambassador and senior embassy officers.

Government's Actions

7. To date, the government's attempts to control urban violence have met with limited success. The US embassy reports that officials "from the President on down" are well aware that this is causing increasing public exasperation and unrest in the armed forces. Rumors are widespread that the government plans to take new and stronger measures soon. It has announced a plan to begin searches for arms and to commission and train a special police guard force of 2,700. In August, Betancourt set up a unified police command over the several independent security and police forces in Caracas. The effectiveness of this measure is as yet unclear, but it is unlikely to provide a complete answer.

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8. Part of the difficulty is that local police forces are far from efficient, and the courts have failed to mete out swift and adequate punishment for terrorist acts. Known terrorists move about the city of Caracas with apparent impunity, and the police in some instances have taken no action to repel FALN attacks. Ultimately, however, the root of the matter is that Betancourt has failed to order effective steps to be taken to curb the terrorists, partly because of electoral considerations.

Implications

9. In the face of terrorist efforts to demonstrate the impotence of the government prior to the national elections, the administration is attempting to preserve its popularity and enhance its voter appeal.

10. President Betancourt is ineligible for re-election. The lineup of candidates and parties for the upcoming election to choose his successor has not yet solidified. Parties may change their nominees until one month before the election. Even when the final lineup is known, assessment of election prospects will be difficult because there has been no electoral test of voter trends since Betancourt's 1958 victory. In fact, one-third of the electorate will be comprised of new voters or of old voters who, since 1958, have moved from a rural to an urban environment and whose attitudes may have changed. It is difficult to anticipate the relative influence of such factors as party loyalties, candidate personalities, and campaign issues. Should the three principal anti-Betancourt candidates join forces for the election, the opposition would probably win the election.

11. The attitude of the military probably will continue to be the key to the survival of constitutional government. The possibility of a military coup to prevent the president-elect from taking office cannot be ruled out, although such a move would be likely only in the case of a candidate who accepts the support of the extreme left or who is thought to be too weak to take action against the FALN.

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12. There are several small groups of military officers who persist in plotting against the government, some from concern over the government's inability to contain the terrorists, others out of personal pique. Responsible military leaders, however, recognize the need for continuing to uphold the constitution and to serve loyally under a civilian government.

13. Betancourt's domestic policy is to walk a narrow line. He must attempt to contain terrorist activities without exposing his government to the charge that he is using unduly repressive measures. He must be sufficiently forceful in his dealings with the FALN to retain the confidence of the people and the loyalty of the military. Above all, as he sees it, he must conduct a free election late in 1963 and turn the government over to elected civilians in March 1964.

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