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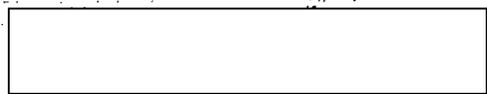
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Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 July 1982

EL SALVADOR: Evaluation of the Perquin Operation

Summary

The recent government operation in northern Morazan Department to retake Perquin revealed several new strengths but some continuing weaknesses of the Salvadoran armed forces. The operation leaves questions about the strategy and tactics of the counterinsurgency effort and the long-term chances for its success. On balance, we believe that while the military demonstrated some improved capabilities, the Perquin episode reaffirmed that no easy military solution to the conflict is in sight. [redacted]

* * *

Insurgent Advantages

The insurgents chose northern Morazan as the place to attempt a major victory over government forces for several reasons.

- The terrain is rugged, with few roads and limited access from San Francisco, where most troops for the department



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are garrisoned (see map). The only bridge into the area was destroyed by the insurgents before their offensive.

- During the rainy season that begins in May, the area is usually cloud covered, hindering government observation and air support. Streams are flooded, and off-road mobility is limited.
- The population is poor, isolated, and after several years of guerrilla presence and indoctrination, basically sympathetic to the insurgent cause.
- The 1969 war between El Salvador and Honduras had resulted in a large pocket of disputed territory, or bolson, along the border. The area was demilitarized and has offered the insurgents a safehaven.

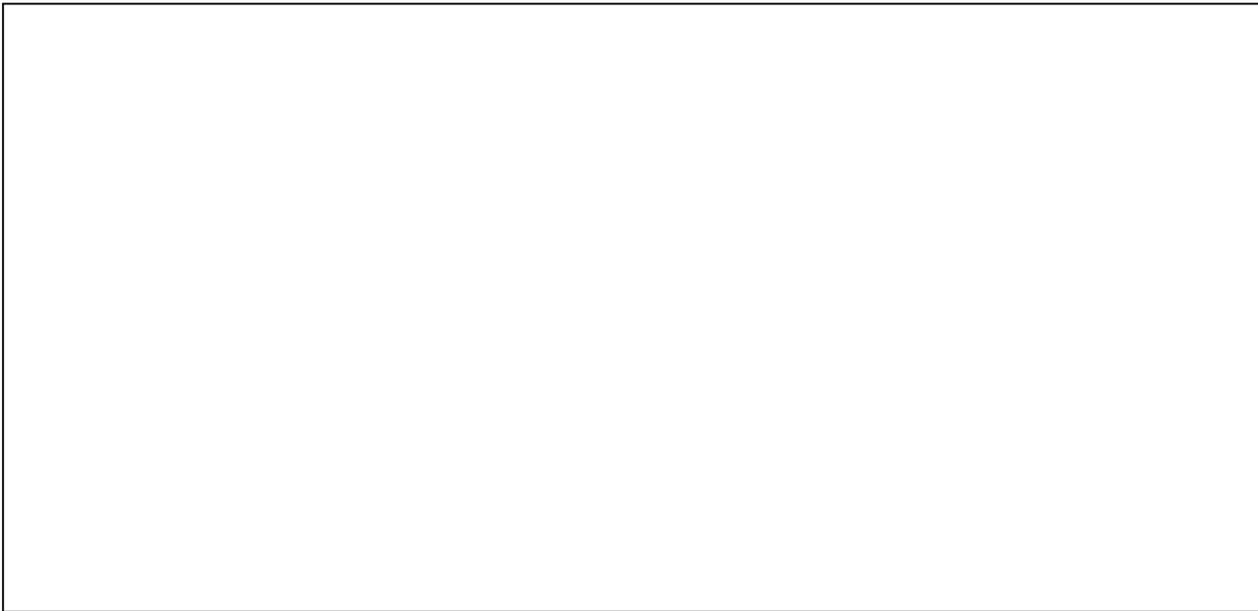
In short, the area is ideal guerrilla territory and has long been a major insurgent stronghold. One of the largest insurgent factions, the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), is headquartered there, with some 1,000 well organized and equipped guerrillas in several heavily defended base camps. The area is so secure that for over a year it has been the location of Radio Venceremos, the insurgents' main propaganda station.

The few government forces in the region normally consist of small detachments in the major towns, which are outnumbered and do no defensive patrolling for fear of being ambushed. The insurgents are able to overrun any of the towns at will, merely by concentrating superior forces. They have done so on several occasions, most notably in August 1981 when they held Perquin for over a week. The guerrillas were also able to prevent balloting in the March 1982 election in every town of northern Morazan.

The government has launched several major offensives against the insurgent bases in northern Morazan, but none has been particularly successful. In December 1981 the government was able to capture the site of Radio Venceremos, preventing it from broadcasting for three weeks until the guerrillas could bring in new equipment. During most government offensives, the guerrillas are able to put up stiff resistance from well-prepared defensive positions and inflict heavy casualties. When the insurgents run low on ammunition and their position becomes untenable, they generally are able to slip across the border.

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Insurgent Preparations



The government became aware of insurgent intentions in northern Morazan and in late April launched a sweep of the area to preempt them. The operation was poorly coordinated, however, and one unit suffered heavy losses in a guerrilla ambush. The sweep apparently upset the insurgents' timing, but it did little damage to their infrastructure in the region. [redacted]



The insurgents bided their time, and when the government launched a major offensive elsewhere in late May that tied up all



three quick-reaction battalions, the guerrillas struck in Morazan. They seized the town of Perquin on 5 June--overrunning the small garrison--and then prepared to ambush relief forces.

[redacted]
Government Response

The initial government effort to retake Perquin fell into the insurgent trap. Two columns of troops sent north from San Francisco were badly mauled. The government rushed additional reinforcements to rescue units trapped north of the Torola River, but their advance was slowed by rugged terrain, bad weather, and determined guerrilla resistance. The lack of adequate air support and communications added to the general confusion. [redacted]

[redacted]
The government finally was forced to send its three quick-reaction battalions to the area, but even their advance was slow. One of the major problems was logistical, as large amounts of supplies had to be moved to the area before the units could advance. In addition, command and control problems were compounded by the large number of troops committed. The situation was further complicated when the Deputy Defense Minister was captured and the local brigade commander was killed after their helicopter was shot down in the area on 17 June. [redacted]

The insurgents' harassing attacks and sabotage operations elsewhere in El Salvador created additional problems.

[redacted]
The government was determined not only to recapture Perquin, however, but to sweep northern Morazan of enemy forces. The Honduran military provided three battalions in a major coordinated effort to block enemy escape across the border. Newly arrived US A-37 attack aircraft also were rushed into action, reportedly with good results. [redacted]

By 19 June--faced with overwhelming government forces and probably running short of ammunition--the insurgents announced they had achieved their objectives and would withdraw. It took

government forces several more days to advance on Perquin, and they finally entered the abandoned town on the 26th. The military then thoroughly swept the entire region, even allowing Honduran forces to enter the disputed border area. Despite these efforts, the insurgents again managed to escape, and there was little further contact. By 3 July, the entire operation ended, and most major units were withdrawn. Slightly larger security forces, however, have been left to garrison the towns in the area. [redacted]

Strengths and Weaknesses

The Perquin operation has revealed several new strengths and confirmed continuing weaknesses of the Salvadoran armed forces. The pluses include:

- The military demonstrated that it can still deny the insurgents lengthy enough control of an area for the guerrillas to declare it a "liberated" zone. This is why the government chose to retake Perquin at all costs rather than simply abandon an economically insignificant region to the enemy.
- The sweep operation should at least temporarily disrupt ERP operations in northern Morazan.
- The military demonstrated strengthened offensive capabilities, especially by deploying all three quick-reaction battalions in two consecutive major operations. Furthermore, the arrival of the six A-37 attack aircraft greatly improved close air support capabilities.
- The improved coordination with Honduras offers the hope that the border area will become much less secure as a guerrilla base.
- Finally, the fact that the ERP essentially launched an offensive on its own with little initial coordination from other factions indicates that insurgent disunity remains a significant weakness. Even after the other factions began to assist, they could undertake little more than harassment and sabotage elsewhere in the country. [redacted]

Among the shortcomings revealed are:

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- Command and control is still weak. The General Staff was able to provide little central direction for the operation, and the local brigade commander had difficulty controlling the many different units sent to the area.



- Logistical support was hampered by the limited road access to northern Morazan and by the need to erect a temporary bridge over the Torola River. Despite an inventory of 20 UH-1H helicopters, military off-road logistical support still appears inadequate for large operations.
- Interdiction of guerrilla supply deliveries remains poor. The insurgents were able to move supplies to Morazan overland from coastal delivery areas and via Honduras with little government interference. Aerial deliveries also were unhindered.
- Despite early warning of the Morazan buildup, Salvadoran military intelligence appeared to miscalculate the guerrilla threat and intentions in the area. Tactical units also apparently were poorly briefed about the insurgent situation, resulting in numerous ambushes.
- Finally, the government still lacks sufficient forces to permanently garrison isolated insurgent-dominated areas following sweep operations. The government-guerrilla manpower ratio is only about 5 to 1, far less than the 10 to 1 force advantage generally considered necessary to defeat an insurgency. [redacted]

Strategy and Tactics

In addition to the Salvadoran military's strengths and weaknesses evident in the operation, the entire episode raises questions about the general strategy and tactics of the counterinsurgency effort--particularly about the value of large-scale sweep operations. The insurgents obviously retain

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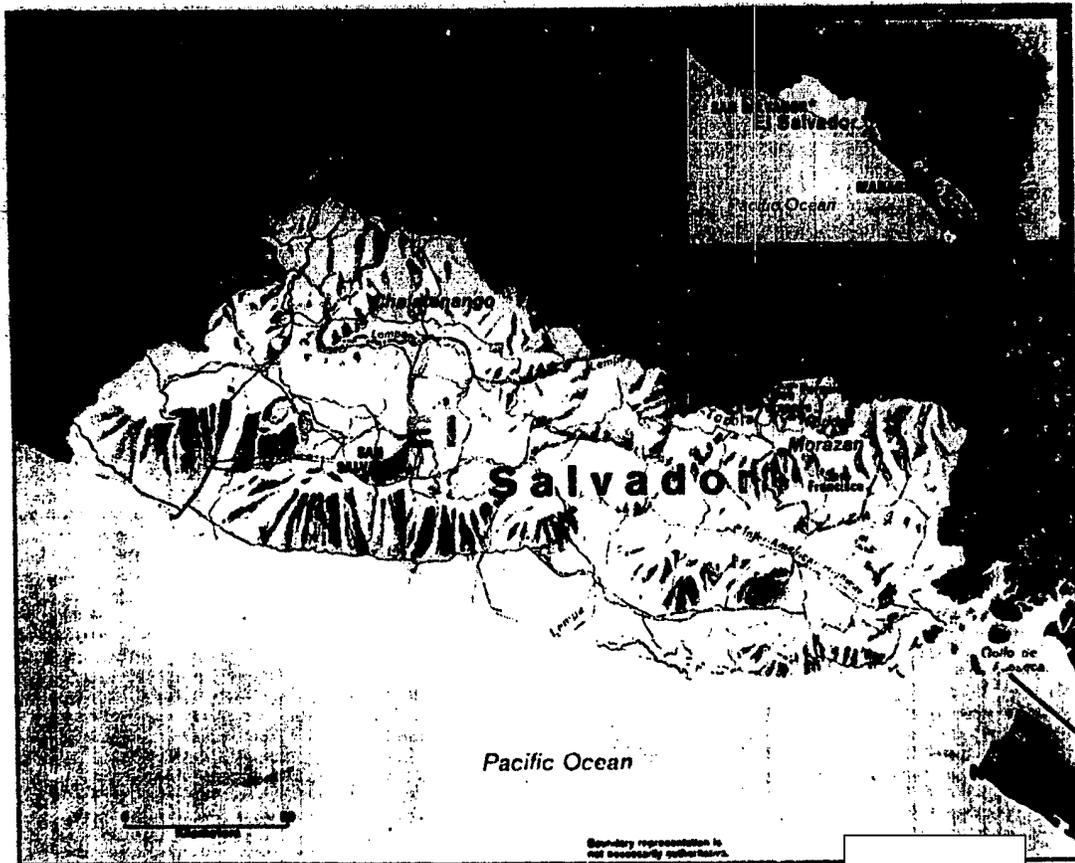
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considerable military strength despite repeated government offensives. Until the military can improve its small unit tactics through better training and leadership--and thereby counter the guerrilla war of attribution--we believe it has little choice but to resort to large-scale operations to prevent a concentration of guerrilla forces large enough to pose a serious and immediate threat in any area. In some cases, such as last year in Cabanas Department, sweep operations have scored some significant successes and seriously weakened insurgent strongholds. They have also preempted any insurgent attempts to create a "liberated" zone. [redacted]

The government fears that an insurgent declaration of a "liberated" zone would challenge its claim to control all Salvadoran territory. It would also attract greater international support for the insurgents and lead to the formation of a "revolutionary" government inside El Salvador. [redacted]

To eliminate permanently major insurgent base areas, especially in northern and eastern El Salvador, we believe the government will have to reduce or overcome its basic weaknesses in leadership, organization, and training. It will also have to improve interdiction of foreign arms shipments and other aid to the guerrillas. And it needs to offer the population of contested areas greater inducement not to support the insurgents. This will have to include not only better security, but also a meaningful amnesty program and some hope of future economic well-being. [redacted]

The government's progress in correcting its major military weaknesses has been agonizingly slow, and has required a relatively significant input of US weapons and training assistance. For the military to make further progress, we believe it will require at least the same level of assistance for the next several years. A greatly increased level of US aid would be difficult for the Salvadoran armed forces to absorb, and would probably require a corresponding increase in the US training presence. [redacted]



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SUBJECT: El Salvador; Evaluation of the Perquin Operation

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