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EL SALVADOR: Plagued by Human Rights Problems

The investigation of the Jesuit killing is proceeding too slowly to counteract charges of government abuses that are undercutting President Cristiani's efforts to improve his country's human rights image. [REDACTED]

The government launched an investigation immediately after the murder of the six Jesuit priests on 16 November, but technical, bureaucratic, and manpower problems have impeded it; the task force to coordinate the probe held its first meeting on Thursday with Cristiani on hand. Despite technical assistance from Spain and the US—Scotland Yard personnel are to arrive today—government agencies, including the US-trained Special Investigations Unit and the Attorney General's office, are having difficulty coordinating efforts and are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. [REDACTED]

The investigation of military units and potential witnesses has uncovered little hard evidence. The government is bogged down by hundreds of mostly false leads elicited by a \$250,000 reward. Key witnesses have repeatedly changed their testimony, and [REDACTED] says others the government believes may have information refuse to come forward, probably fearing retribution. The Catholic Church's human rights group, Tutela Legal, recently admitted some of its members initially removed evidence from the scene, including shell casings and a placard reading "death to traitors to the FMLN." [REDACTED]

Meanwhile, local and international churches charge the government is systematically persecuting them. Although leaving the majority of churches unaffected, the government made searches and arrests of church workers in 25 cases in the first two weeks of the FMLN offensive. The government claims security forces had information suggesting the church workers were helping the FMLN, but, except for the discovery of a large arms cache at the home of a US church worker, the searches produced only pro-FMLN propaganda. [REDACTED]

Comment: The government and military realize their credibility and prospects for continued US aid probably depend on quick resolution of the Jesuit case. Most observers believe that the inherent weakness of El Salvador's judicial system makes prospects for prosecution poor even if solid evidence is found or suspects identified. [REDACTED]

Although the military continues to believe some church groups support the FMLN, Cristiani probably will seek to reassure local church leaders his government is not against them. He already had ordered a halt to such searches unless cleared by the Army High Command. [REDACTED]

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