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27 MAY 86

EL SALVADOR: Military Seizes Investigation

The armed forces have taken control from civilian authorities in the two-month-old investigation of military personnel involved in kidnaping for profit. [REDACTED]

The case will be handled by military courts under Decree 50, a special legal provision that gives the military jurisdiction over cases involving subversion and terrorism. [REDACTED] earlier this month that the accused leader of the kidnap ring—Lieutenant Colonel Staben—was released for "lack of evidence," while some accomplices, including another important line officer, Lieutenant Colonel Zacapa, remain at large. Three suspected members of the crime ring have died in suspicious circumstances—two while in police custody and another after being released from jail temporarily. [REDACTED]

Comment: Pressures within the armed forces probably are behind the unprecedented application of Decree 50 to criminal activity by military personnel. Military courts probably will limit the scope of the investigation, which could tarnish the international image of justice in El Salvador. Civilian investigators were making progress in developing evidence implicating Staben, Zacapa, and at least 20 others. [REDACTED]

Approved for Release

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[REDACTED]