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EL SALVADOR: Allegations of Military Abuses Continue

Cases of human rights abuses continue to dog the Salvadoran military even though it has made considerable progress in that area since the early 1980s. The police arrested an Army major this week on charges he had ordered the killing of 10 civilians last September. A military investigation said the officer planned the operation in order to eliminate rebel collaborators and subsequently arranged the coverup. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church's human rights office has accused government troops of raping and killing two rebel medical personnel and killing three wounded insurgents during a raid last month. The office has a history of incorrect reporting on alleged Army killings. Chief of Staff Ponce is satisfied with the military's explanation that the guerrillas were killed defending a field hospital. [REDACTED] and has ordered no further investigation.

Comment: The major's arrest was largely the result of US pressure and growing concern in the military about continued US aid. He probably will face disciplinary action because senior officers are eager to avoid additional negative publicity from the controversial human rights case. The military leadership also is disinclined, however, to investigate allegations of abuse forcefully, despite efforts to inspire better human rights performance. Although the circumstances of the attack against the field hospital remain unclear, rebel support groups probably will use the issue as the core of their campaign against the armed forces and the government.

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If the Sandinistas are successful in redefining the Esquipulas democratization provisions using human rights criteria, Nicaragua and the FMLN will point increasingly to alleged government abuses or the inability to control death squad activity. This poses a potentially acute public relations problem, especially for an ARENA administration. Government refusal or inability to rein in human rights abuses or negotiate with the FMLN could have repercussions in the US Congress, possibly threatening bipartisan support for continuing US aid.

Implications for US Interests

In the most likely scenario—a protracted war of attrition—the key political battle will shift to the United States. The FMLN will endeavor to reinvigorate US political opposition to continuing military and economic support. The FMLN's January 1989 peace plan is clearly part of this strategy—a seemingly forthcoming offer that meets many of the government's oft-repeated demands, the rejection of which will make the government appear rigid and duplicitous.

For the Salvadoran Government, the task will be essentially defensive. While carefully monitoring US Congressional opinion, it will attempt to refute allegations by the guerrillas and their sympathizers of human rights abuses and corruption, remain open to the concept of a regional peace accord and dissenting strains of opinion, and ensure that the election is fair, and unmarked by significant fraud.

If the government loses the public relations war with the FMLN, it may well find itself facing reduced levels of economic and military aid or conditionality on continuing aid that it will find burdensome or even intolerable. US leverage in supporting the survival of El Salvador's democratic institutions and improvement in the human rights arena derives from continuing high levels of US economic and military aid. In