

El Salvador: Guerrilla Use
of Mine Warfare

The insurgents' recent proposal to halt mine warfare if the Army will halt its use of artillery and aerial bombing highlights a guerrilla tactic that has inflicted heavy casualties on both military personnel and civilians. Hard hit by declining manpower and facing an increasingly effective Army, the rebels over the past two years have come to rely less on pitched battles and more on landmines to prolong the war and make it costly to the government. Army countermeasures have had only limited success, although a government propaganda campaign has generated criticism of the guerrillas. Since San Salvador has rejected the proposal, the insurgents almost certainly will continue to use mining, and both government and noncombat civilian casualties are likely to mount.

As Army capabilities have grown and their own fortunes have ebbed, the Salvadoran guerrillas have resorted increasingly to the use of landmines. These weapons offer a relatively cheap, low-risk, and efficient way to inflict casualties on the armed forces.

The guerrillas deploy landmines both offensively and defensively with devastating effect.

indicates command-detonated mines frequently are used in ambushes to kill or maim government personnel and to damage military vehicles. Pressure-detonated mines are concealed around guerrilla encampments to prevent or impede government attacks or infiltration. When in retreat, guerrillas may place either type along likely avenues of approach to slow or disrupt advancing government forces.

indicates the insurgents also are making greater use of "bouncing betty" mines, which are propelled upward about waist high before exploding, thereby increasing their

destructive potential. One version apparently has a blast range of 40 to 50 meters and may prove effective even against low-flying helicopters.

High Casualties

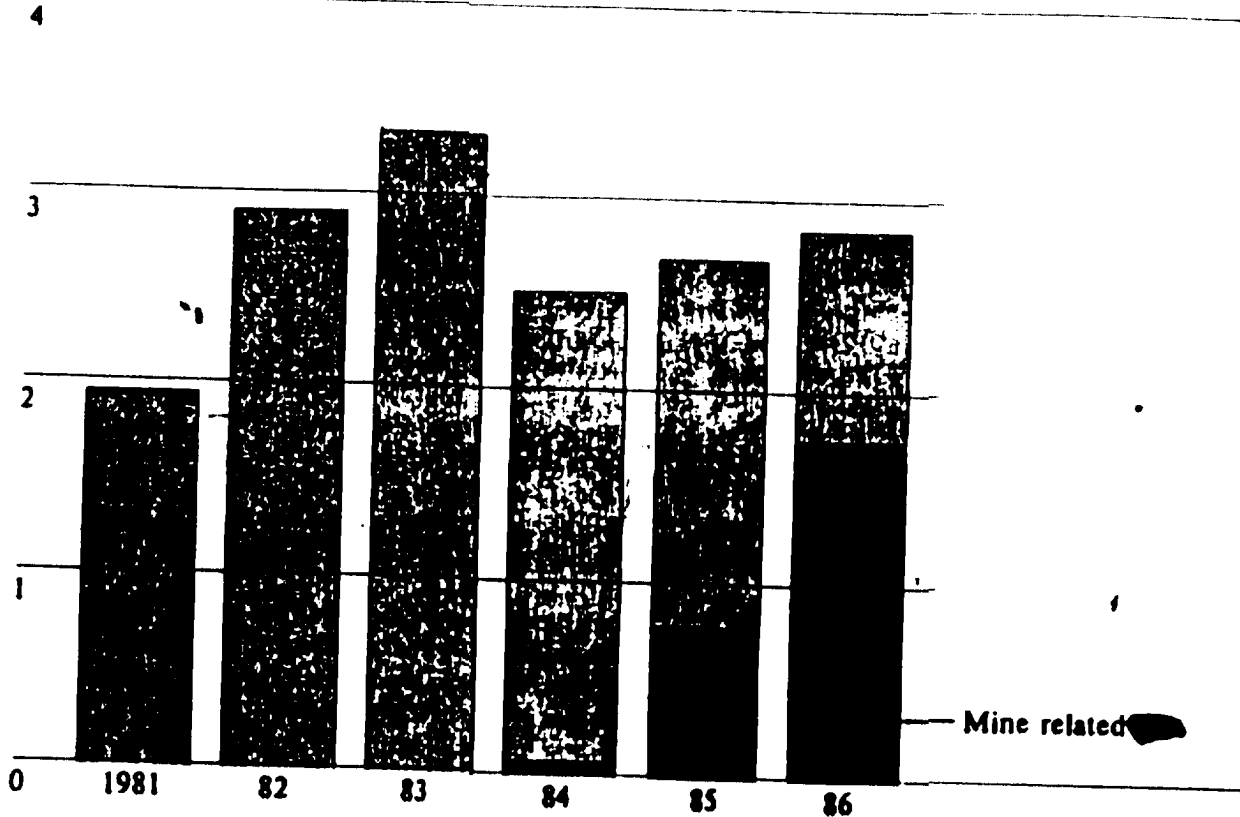
The guerrillas' expansion of mine warfare has taken an increasingly heavy toll on both military personnel and civilians. indicates that mines accounted for nearly two-thirds of all military casualties in 1986—1,753 out of 2,846—compared to about one-third in 1985 and a mere 65 out of 2,508 killed and wounded in 1984. indicates that government mine casualties during the first two weeks of "Operation Monterrosa"—initiated on 20 May—were high and that at least one elite battalion was withdrawn from the field because of losses. Medical care required for those wounded by mines is expensive and further strains the government's dwindling economic resources. In addition, guerrilla mines—often placed indiscriminately near populated areas—killed at least 45 civilians and wounded 162 in 1986.

Last March, several employees of the International Red Cross were injured by a guerrilla mine planted in the main street of a small village in Morazan Department.

that the Army, for its part, employs mines sparingly and, as a matter of policy, avoids use of unrecoverable devices. Army mines accounted for only one civilian death in all of 1986.

El Salvador: Total Military Casualties, 1981-86

Thousand



Data for losses due to mines available 1984-86 only.

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Sources of Supply

The insurgents obtain explosives and other components from a variety of sources. Many landmines are homemade, using commonplace, locally available ingredients, such as chemical fertilizer for the explosive agent and plastic irrigation piping for the casing/shrapnel. However, they also receive some fulminants and other ingredients from Nicaragua and other outside

sources. Moreover, the guerrillas apparently are sometimes able to detect and steal the Army's mines.

Government Countermeasures

The high casualty figures suggest that government countermeasures are achieving only modest success. The receipt of new mine detectors in May

Government poster shows
innocent victim of FMLN
mines and her human
rights.

VICTIMA INOCENTE DE MINAS DEL FMLN



¿Y SUS DERECHOS HUMANOS?

[REDACTED]

1986 boosted Army morale, but the guerrillas have been able to thwart them either by constructing smaller devices, reducing the number of metal components, or burying the mines deeper [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] that seasoned Salvadoran troops discover more landmines through visual observation than with the detectors. Tactical developments—moving away from predictable deployment patterns and toward greater use of small-unit tactics and irregular maneuver and advancement routes on the part of larger units—make the Army somewhat less vulnerable to established minefields. Weather also can be used to the government's advantage, as heavy rains—common in the region from June until September—often cause the mines to short-circuit [REDACTED]

The government also has taken the propaganda initiative, with considerable success. Posters depicting a young girl who lost a leg to a guerrilla mine greet travelers arriving at San Salvador's international airport. Recent international press items have publicized the situation, and the Catholic Church and some human rights organizations—those not

functioning as insurgent front groups—are increasingly vocal in condemning civilian casualties from guerrilla mines [REDACTED]

Prospects

The guerrillas' offer to forgo mine warfare—a vital, low-cost element of their "protracted popular war" strategy—suggests they recognize the damage to their interests and are being hurt badly by the Army's superior firepower. The government is unlikely to reconsider its rejection of the proposal in the near term, however, and the rebels almost certainly will continue to rely heavily on mining, resulting in mounting casualties among civilians as well as military personnel [REDACTED]

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