

[REDACTED]

18 September 1990

[REDACTED]

The Situation in El Salvador

President Cristiani, hoping to head off cuts in US military aid to El Salvador, plans to meet with key members of Congress when he visits Washington next week (24 September). He probably will cite his government's commitment to ongoing negotiations with the FMLN guerrillas as well as the rebels' continued preparations for large-scale military operations. The President expects tough questions about the Jesuit murders and the glacial pace of the investigation.

- Cristiani will likely focus on the Senate, which is scheduled to vote this month on the Leahy-Dodd Bill, which would halve the \$85 million in FY91 US military assistance; the House already has approved a similar measure. The bill would reinstate the full amount if the guerrillas launch an offensive, pull out of the negotiations, or receive substantial new arms shipments. On the other hand, San Salvador could lose even the remaining \$42.5 million if it breaks off talks, fails to show good faith on the Jesuit case, or falls to a coup.
- The Congress will likely learn this week that [REDACTED] has informed Cristiani the remaining \$19 million of FY90 military assistance has been suspended because of the lack of progress on the Jesuit case, [REDACTED]

Status of the Jesuit Case

Despite continual prodding from [REDACTED] the investigation into the murder of the six Jesuit priests on 16 November 1989 has not progressed. [REDACTED] indicates that neither the recent unprecedented appearance by Cristiani before the presiding judge, nor the testimony of some senior officers have eased suspicions--even among some Salvadoran officers--that the decision to kill the priests was made by the top levels of the military.

- Defense Minister Ponce--who was Chief of Staff at the time--has told [REDACTED] that the commanders held a strategy session on the night before the killings but insists they made no decision to kill the Jesuits.

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[REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]
- Contradictory testimony, the disappearance of key evidence, and the reluctance of senior officers to volunteer information, however, bolster suspicions of high-level military complicity. Such allegations are well-known to US Congressmen.
 - In August, [REDACTED] Col. Rivas, head of the government's Special Investigations Unit, told [REDACTED] that the decision to kill the Jesuits was indeed made at the commanders' meeting on 15 November and implied that Col. Ponce was party to the decision. [REDACTED]
 - Further clouding the government's record is the recent promotion of Col. Ponce to Defense Minister. The possibility of his implication in the decision to kill the priests or the subsequent cover-up will make it difficult for Cristiani to prove his government's willingness to punish all those responsible. We have no evidence of Ponce's direct involvement in the murders, but he has, at a minimum, acquiesced in the cover-up. [REDACTED]

Little Progress on Dialogue

The fourth round of government-guerrilla talks under UN auspices concluded this week with little apparent progress.

- The government is hoping for a cease-fire agreement prior to the March 1991 legislative elections but continues to balk at rebel demands to purge the Army, offering instead cosmetic changes such as abolishing the civil defense program. San Salvador reportedly will consider more extensive reforms only after a verifiable cease-fire is in place.
- Sweeping command changes this month removed many incompetent and corrupt officers but did not go far enough to appease the guerrillas.
- The FMLN--which, [REDACTED] is increasingly divided over the value of negotiations--has hardened its position. [REDACTED] indicates that some guerrilla commanders hope the government will walk out of the talks and give the rebels an excuse for a new round of attacks, including the assassination of military and civilian leaders.

[REDACTED]

-- Although they differ over timing and tactics, the five key rebel commanders [REDACTED] have agreed to initiate a major military campaign. We believe the rebels are prepared for large-scale operations and are waiting only for the order to begin. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]