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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

EL SALVADOR: The Significance of Popular Support

*//The critical factor in El Salvador now is the military situation and arms flow. Over the medium term, however, the campaign to gain support from a disenfranchised public will be a decisive factor.//*

*//The left came close to igniting a national insurrection early last year--well before the accelerated arms flow--because of its popular backing. Membership in extremist-controlled front groups exceeded 60,000, and guerrilla groups were making inroads in urban labor. The combination of street demonstrations--in some cases drawing tens of thousands--and strikes was beginning to threaten the government's control of San Salvador.//*

*//The government arrested the left's momentum by launching reforms and by improving security measures in the capital, but these programs have virtually stalled. The majority of the population, repelled by the violence on both sides, is still uncommitted.//*

*//The guerrillas are increasingly recognizing the drawbacks of alienating the populace. Previously, they had boasted publicly of scores of indiscriminate killings during takeovers of various towns. They are now more actively cultivating domestic support by reducing attacks on population centers and have established their own radio stations.//*

*//The insurgents, however, are not attracting much popular support. Recruitment for the guerrilla forces does not appear to be picking up.//*

--continued

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[REDACTED]

//There are an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 full-time armed insurgents and perhaps several thousand part-time collaborators. Moreover, guerrilla ranks were at least temporarily thinned by several hundred casualties during the recent offensive.// [REDACTED]

//If they are to gain more adherents, the guerrillas need a spectacular military success or a continuation of government insensitivity and abuse. Conversely, if the government is able to curb the excesses that characterize life in El Salvador today and follow through on reforms, it will begin to turn the tide and gain adherents for its cause.// [REDACTED]

//Government leaders recognize the need to enlist popular support. They know that failure to push ahead with their reform program leaves them vulnerable. Lack of technical and financial resources, however, and the continuing violence have permitted little forward movement on land reform, the heart of the junta's economic program.// [REDACTED]

//Most of El Salvador's cultivated land has been targeted for expropriation and redistribution, but adequate technical assistance, farm credit, and marketing organization are simply not available. Phase one of the land reform, redistribution of the largest estates, was largely completed last year. Management problems on the cooperative, however, have reduced yields and encouraged shifting from production of export to basic food crops.// [REDACTED]

//Phase two, the expropriation of the medium-sized farms has been shelved because of the impact this would have on the country's already dwindling export earnings. Completion of the so-called "land-to-the-tiller" phase is far off in the future. Trained administrative and technical personnel to administer this ambitious undertaking are not available.// [REDACTED]

//The land reform program has enraged the right. It also is opposed by the left since it threatens to increase peasant support for the government. As a result, gunmen

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

from both factions are killing peasants on the newly formed cooperatives and intimidating land reform administrators.// [REDACTED]

//Despite the pressing military problems, the junta's greatest longer run vulnerability is violence that is officially tolerated. The murders in November of leftist political leaders, including a minister of the first reform junta, were the work of security forces.// [REDACTED]

//Summary execution of prisoners is a standard practice. Widespread, and often random, violence by private rightwing groups is viewed as part of government repression because there is no official move to curb it.// [REDACTED]

//As a result, the reputation of junta President Luarte and his Christian Democratic Party have been tarnished, and the conditional support for the government--among the populace and abroad--has been jeopardized. Many members of the 150,000-strong peasant union, the principal beneficiary of land reform, probably blame government-allied thugs for the murder of union leader Viera in January.// [REDACTED]

//US labor organizations, which have strongly backed the government and have major influence, this month warned the government that it will lose their support if it does not improve labor relations within 90 days. Salvadoran and US labor organizations want the government to open a genuine dialogue with union leaders--rather than what they believe has been arrogant treatment. They also want ultraconservative officers sacked.// [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]