

Director of  
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# Near-Term Military Prospects in El Salvador

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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## NEAR-TERM MILITARY PROSPECTS IN EL SALVADOR

Information available as of 6 May 1981 was  
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

Since the unsuccessful January offensive, the leftist extremist insurgents in El Salvador have largely been forced onto the defensive in terms of direct military combat. A sharp decline in external arms and supplies, difficulties in replacing losses in trained manpower, and frequent, if inadequately executed, counterinsurgency sweeps by government forces have been the key factors.

The insurgents, however, retain a potent capability for disruptive and destructive small-unit operations (terrorism, economic sabotage, and hit-and-run guerrilla raids). We believe the insurgents will concentrate on these activities over the next couple of months. They might, however, launch a limited combat offensive, probably more for political than military purposes (for example, to stimulate pressures for negotiations).

Despite numerous military and nonmilitary uncertainties (regarding, for example, the prospects for resumption of major external supplies, and for a government crisis), we see little chance of dramatic change in the present uneasy stalemate over the next several months.

Even with the renewal of ample supplies to the insurgents from abroad, government forces—strengthened by US assistance—would probably be able to blunt any major offensive and force the insurgents back on the defensive. If the insurgents were reinforced as well by a thousand or so well-trained combatants from abroad, the odds would still be against their achieving outright military success, though they would be in a good position to extend their areas of control.

In part because of longstanding political problems and military deficiencies, government forces are unlikely to eliminate the insurgents or seriously erode their considerable disruptive and destructive capabilities any time soon.

Note: This Interagency Intelligence Memorandum was requested by the Department of State and was prepared, under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America, by the Directorate for JCS Support of the Defense Intelligence Agency. It was coordinated with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the National Security Agency, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, with the participation of the intelligence organizations of the military services.

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## DISCUSSION

### I. MILITARY TRENDS

1. Over the past year, El Salvador's leftist extremists have developed one of the most potent insurgent forces in recent Latin American history.<sup>1</sup> Early in 1980—with little formal training, limited experience, and few modern arms—the insurgents were restricted, for the most part, to small-unit hit-and-run assaults on nonmilitary targets and on isolated security posts and patrols. During the year—with recruitment to their current estimated level of about 4,000 full-time combatants and with slow augmentation of their cadre trained in Nicaragua and Cuba and their supplies of modern arms—they began to undertake more frequent military operations involving 50 to 100 men.

2. Toward the end of the year, the insurgents' military strength was sharply enhanced by acquisition of relatively abundant supplies of modern arms and military equipment: semiautomatic and automatic rifles, machineguns, recoilless rifles, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades, as well as explosives, uniforms, medical supplies, and communications gear. With encouragement and some logistic support from the USSR, these came mainly from Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Eastern Europe, through Cuba and then Nicaragua.

3. The January 1981 offensive marked the high point in the insurgents' combat activity. They attempted to overwhelm the government's military and security forces through simultaneous assaults on key towns countrywide. But a "popular insurrection," which the insurgent leaders recognized would be needed for lasting military gains, did not occur. Government forces were severely strained by the offensive. Nonetheless, after two weeks of heavy fighting, they forced the insurgents to terminate their coordinated assaults, to evacuate all the struck towns, and to retreat to their sanctuaries along the Honduran border and on rugged volcanic highlands.

<sup>1</sup> The insurgents now are organized as the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN), a confederation of five independent guerrilla organizations. FMLN military forces are all controlled by leftist extremist leaders, who cooperate at the political and diplomatic level with small groups of more moderate antigovernment leftists.

4. Over the past three months, the number of military assaults by medium-sized or large insurgent units has steadily declined (in contrast, small-unit hit-and-run attacks and terrorism have been increasing). In the January offensive the insurgents launched over a dozen large and sustained attacks throughout the country, since then most attacks by 100 or more insurgents have been near their Honduran border strongholds and have been of short duration. There were four such attacks on 1 February and four during March. There were only two large attacks in April, including one on a small town in Morazan Province in the northeast, which the insurgents managed to hold against government counterattacks for over two weeks. No sizable insurgent attacks were reported during the first six days of May.

5. As compared with 1980, major military combat has remained at a high level, but mainly at the initiative of government forces. These relatively frequent counterinsurgency sweeps—over a score thus far—are having only limited success in directly damaging the insurgents or permanently routing them from their enclaves.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, they do not substantially limit the mobility of small insurgent units engaged in hit-and-run raids. But government military operations since February have kept the insurgents on the defensive and have exacerbated the many problems they now suffer in terms of capabilities for major military combat. This, in turn, is forcing the insurgents to return to their previous strategy of concentration on urban terrorism, economic sabotage, and hit-and-run raids—in other words, protracted low-level guerrilla warfare to undermine the government's strength and will to resist.

### II. INSURGENT STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

#### Supplies

6. In the past the level and intensity of the insurgents' military operations were related principally to their ability to provide combat units with the means to fight. During 1980 the insurgents were able to satisfy

<sup>2</sup> The annex contains maps and a chart depicting recent major military operations.

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basic requirements for sporadic military combat with internal resources and limited external support. The extensive combat of the January offensive was sustained only by the abundant flow of foreign arms and supplies that began in October and lasted through January.

7. Since February, US diplomatic pressures, particularly against Nicaragua, have sharply slowed the flow of external supplies. Overall, insurgent war stocks (especially ammunition) have declined substantially, and the insurgents are increasingly dependent on intimidation and theft to acquire food and medicine. Some units still possess adequate stocks, but others suffer severe shortages. Attempts to redistribute available resources to ease local shortages have been hampered by a reluctance of constituent groups to share supplies. Meanwhile, continued military pressure by government forces, including seizures of supply caches, serves to disrupt insurgent military operations and to exacerbate supply problems.

8. Abundant war supplies intended for the Salvadoran insurgents are still stored in Nicaragua and Cuba. We believe that the Cubans and Nicaragua's Sandinista leaders have made preparations to enhance the supply flow; and some small increases have taken place in recent weeks. But for now, limited external assistance is limiting the scale of insurgent-initiated combat. The insurgents still are better equipped than they were a year ago, however, and have sufficient materiel to undertake extensive disruptive and destructive small-unit activities, including hit-and-run assaults, terrorism, and economic sabotage.

#### Recruitment and Training

9. The increased intensity of military engagements since January has also created manpower problems for the insurgents. The insurgents have suffered sizable losses since January—from combat as well as defections and desertion. We believe full-time insurgent combatants still number approximately 4,000.<sup>3</sup> They are augmented by a militia and auxiliary of unknown size, which probably is adequate to support the full-time insurgents in low-level guerrilla warfare, though

<sup>3</sup> We have no hard data on insurgent numbers or casualties. In mid-1980, several reports indicated that the insurgents had about 4,000 full-time combatants, a number that seemed to match up credibly with their level of operations and fragmentary knowledge about constituent units. We estimate that since January the insurgents have lost and replaced about 1,000 combatants, but again there is no hard evidence.

perhaps less so for sustained, large-scale military operations.

10. In the past, losses were replaced rather effortlessly through local recruitment and the return of insurgents from overseas training. There is also evidence of a small foreign presence in insurgent ranks, including Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans. Apparently, the insurgents are finding it increasingly difficult to replace their recent losses. They have intensified recruitment efforts to include more frequent forced conscription. To stem desertions and defections, they are also attempting to increase pay to cadre members and combatants. Present recruitment difficulties probably indicate that the guerrillas have lost much of their formerly considerable popular support. Lack of tactical successes also hampers recruitment and discourages the participation of additional foreign combatants. Moreover, even though the insurgents probably are retaining their overall numerical strength, the continued loss of experienced fighters, combined with an influx of untrained recruits, makes it difficult for the insurgents to undertake major military combat at this time.

11. These may prove to be only temporary difficulties. The growing numbers of displaced and desperate peasants and townsmen in the regions of insurgent operations provide an ample pool for potential recruitment. Moreover, a substantial number of earlier recruits are available outside the country, in training or waiting to return after training.<sup>4</sup>

#### Leadership

12. Key insurgent leaders and a good part of the foreign-trained cadre are by now hardened revolutionaries. We do not believe recent military setbacks have undercut their determination to seize control of the country. The rigors of military combat have probably intensified ideological and personal frictions among constituent units. In protracted combat, the unwillingness of some units to subordinate themselves either to a central authority or to local commanders from other insurgent groups complicates problems of command and control. The location of the insurgents' high command in Nicaragua and the lack of experience of local commanders in training recruits under combat conditions also create problems for sustained military action. But these problems do not substan-

<sup>4</sup> We have no hard information on their numbers, though we would estimate about 1,000.

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tially degrade insurgent potential for small-unit guerrilla and terrorist activity.

#### In Sum

13. We believe the insurgents will concentrate in the near term on small-unit operations rather than on major military engagements. This would minimize the impact of their present vulnerabilities and take advantage of their considerable strengths. Their widespread sanctuaries, together with their cumulative experience, and present numbers and supplies, afford them a very considerable potential for disruption and destruction.

### III. THE SALVADORAN ARMED FORCES

14. The Salvadoran armed forces demonstrated in January 1981 their ability to blunt a major military campaign by the insurgents. Government forces, however, are not strong enough either to eliminate the insurgents or to substantially erode their capabilities for debilitating small-unit operations. Recent US military assistance has already bolstered the spirit and improved the arms and equipment of government forces. But plans for improvements in military organization and "know-how" for counterinsurgency can have only a gradual and selective impact on longstanding deficiencies.

#### Manpower

15. Salvadoran military and security forces have recently been expanded apparently to some 20,000 men, including administrative and support personnel and constabulary and police units.<sup>5</sup> This number is insufficient simultaneously to attack the major insurgent strongholds and to defend all potential economic and political targets. Consequently, large areas of the countryside are relatively undefended and the insurgents can operate with relative impunity there, as well as slip in behind or around government forces to strike at lightly defended towns.

#### Command and Control

16. The Army and security forces have long been misused by senior officers to further their political as-

<sup>5</sup>The armed forces number about 11,600. The remainder are in the National Guard (4,300), Treasury Police (1,500), and National Police (2,700). The Army's ranks are filled mainly by draftees. The other forces are manned by volunteers, mostly Army veterans. The officers in all units—about 550—are Army personnel; nearly all are graduates of El Salvador's Military Academy. Various part-time militias at times assist government forces in local operations.

pirations. Consequently, command structures have functioned more effectively for the conduct of political maneuver than for conventional combat, and even less for dealing with the insurgency they now face. More than one chain of command exists, resulting in blurred lines of authority and generally slow and disorganized responses. Command and control problems also are a principal cause of endemic abuses of authority, especially indiscriminate repression of non-combatants and cooperation with rightist civilian terrorists. Many small elements—especially in the National Guard and Treasury Police—operate in isolated areas and are virtually autonomous. Beyond the effective control of responsible command authority and battered constantly by local guerrillas and rightist pressures, these elements frequently react brutally against essentially nonpolitical civilians as well as centrist and moderate leftist organizations. The reassignment of some officers and the discharge of some non-commissioned officers guilty of such transgressions have not been sufficient to effect greater discipline.

#### Training and Logistics

17. National-level, centralized training for recruits was halted last year, and responsibility for training was transferred to local commanders, who were already overburdened with numerous tactical and administrative responsibilities. The national recruit training center was recently reopened, but it will provide unit training for combat operations rather than individual basic training.

18. Despite some recent improvements, inadequate mobility and logistic deficiencies represent serious problem areas. Counterinsurgency operations invariably exceed allocated resources. The resultant logistic strain causes tactical operations either to "grind down" or to be terminated prematurely. Mobility is not sufficient to decisively engage the insurgents, who consistently escape entrapment.

19. Military intelligence is also seriously deficient, because of interagency rivalry and lack of dedicated resources. In particular, inability properly to identify and locate the enemy results in ineffective use of combat assets and often in the deaths of civilian noncombatants.

#### In Sum

20. Government forces still have superior weapons overall and more dependable sources of supplies than

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the insurgents, and outnumber them by about five to one. Especially if the insurgents concentrate on small-unit operations, the margin of advantage is far from decisive, however. Government forces are fully committed to keeping the insurgents from expanding their present range of operations. In effect, there is no sizable reserve for driving insurgent forces from any key enclave. Efforts to further expand the Army to 13,000 men—including the training of a new elite “quick reaction” battalion of 1,000—should, later in 1981, appreciably enhance military capacity to apply pressure. US efforts in the areas of organization, training, and “know-how” should also upgrade military effectiveness but, again, only after some time.

#### IV. NONMILITARY AND EXTERNAL FACTORS

21. A number of nonmilitary and external factors will probably have a decided impact on the ultimate fate of the Salvadoran insurgency. Even in the short term, these factors could noticeably influence the relative effectiveness of the contending forces. Collectively, they complicate the task of projecting trends.

##### Government Stability

22. The military and civilian components of the ruling junta are held together more by US pressures and fear of alternatives than by mutual respect and common outlook. Even in combination, moreover, they have only a narrow base of positive political support. Center-right and center-left groups do not trust the government and at best lend grudging support. Rightist extremists conspire to drive civilian and military moderates out of the government. A government crisis—most likely rightist pressures to force civilian moderates from the junta—is an ever-present possibility and could temporarily divert the attention and reduce the effectiveness of the military.

##### Popular Attitudes

23. The politically inarticulate population is weary of the violence and brutality, and generally as fearful of the government's forces as of the insurgents. While a growing majority probably sees the government as the lesser of two evils, widespread alienation and desperation in effect mark many as potential supporters of the insurgents. El Salvador is a small battlefield, and augmentation of insurgent forces by even a few thousand additional recruits or passive support by, say, one-third of the population would greatly enhance the

potency of the insurgency. A combination of an increase in brutality by government forces and an improvement in insurgent prospects could precipitate this greater support.

##### Economic Strains

24. El Salvador's poor majority is always under considerable economic stress. A marked decline in economic activity since 1979—caused by the disruption and destruction of the insurgency and by the shattered confidence of key entrepreneurial groups—is turning this stress into desperation for many peasants forced off the land and for laborers and tradesmen forced out of work. In itself, and ideology aside, continued economic decline could convert many from grudging acceptance of the government to outright opposition—to the benefit of the insurgents indirectly (riots, looting) and directly (recruitment and support).

##### Pressures for Negotiation

25. If pressures for a negotiated settlement with the insurgents—from foreign countries and political groups, from the Vatican, and from the Salvadoran church—force a reluctant government to open talks, the resultant reduction of military pressures would permit the insurgents to strengthen their hand for an almost inevitable resumption of the violence.

##### Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan Assistance

26. The assistance orchestrated by the USSR, Cuba, and Nicaragua has sharply upgraded insurgent strength over the past year. US diplomatic pressures and fear of US countermeasures have made all three countries more cautious. While less conspicuous support activities probably continue at past levels—especially training in Cuba and Nicaragua and planning and intelligence assistance—the flow of arms and supplies has been sharply reduced since February. We judge that these three and other foreign benefactors will underwrite sufficient supplies to maintain at least the insurgents' present capabilities for guerrilla warfare. Paradoxically, either a relaxation of US pressures or their sharp acceleration (especially against Nicaragua and Cuba) could touch off major resupply efforts as well.

#### V. NEAR-TERM PROSPECTS

27. We see little chance of any sharp change in the present uneasy stalemate between the insurgents and

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government forces over the next couple of months. Numerous military and nonmilitary uncertainties cloud the outlook much beyond that. Nonetheless, the odds favor a continuation of essentially the present uneasy balance throughout 1981.

28. In the near term, the insurgents will probably concentrate on low-level operations to weaken the government further, while conserving resources and regrouping for another major offensive later in the year. Terrorist attacks and economic sabotage have increased sharply in recent months. A limited combat offensive might be launched by the insurgents at any time, but probably more for political than military purposes (for example, to stimulate the pressures for negotiation).

29. Even with resumption of ample external supplies to the insurgents, the government forces—strengthened by US assistance—would probably be able to blunt any major offensive later in the year and force the insurgents back on the defensive. If the insurgents were reinforced as well by a thousand or so

well-trained combatants from abroad, there is a better than even chance that government forces would still be able to block an outright insurgent victory, but they would find it much more difficult to prevent some spread in the areas under insurgent control. The military costs to the insurgents of any such gains would be high, but the political benefits—increased popular and diplomatic support—would probably also be considerable.

30. Even with relatively favorable military and political developments, government forces are unlikely to eliminate the insurgents or seriously erode their considerable capacity for destabilizing guerrilla and terrorist activity during the course of the year. The likely continuation of major political problems (government instability and lack of popular support), worsening of economic conditions, and only slow and uneven improvement in military "know-how" of government forces will probably enable the insurgents to maintain essentially their current capabilities. In sum, we see little chance of a meaningful reduction in the insurgents' challenge any time soon.

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## ANNEX

### INSURGENT AND GOVERNMENT MILITARY OPERATIONS

1. The areas of insurgent concentrations in El Salvador have remained relatively constant over the past year, in enclaves along the Honduran border and on volcanic highlands elsewhere (as shown on the map of "Insurgent Strongholds"). Since the January offensive, which featured insurgent military attacks throughout the country, most insurgent-initiated attacks of 100 or more men have been near the Honduran border (as shown on the map of "Military Activity"). The number of these attacks has declined since January to approximately the level of October-December 1980 (as shown on the chart of "Military Operations").

2. The insurgents are organized along four vaguely defined front zones, that contain subzones in which particular units tend to confine their operations. The Central and Paracentral Fronts are the focus of most major insurgent operations; these two areas contain the majority of the population and the highest urban concentrations. Other areas of intense guerrilla activity are found in the southern and northern subzones of the Eastern Front—areas of reinforcement and resupply from Nicaragua and Honduras.

3. The most highly trained and motivated guerrillas seem to operate in the northernmost reaches of Chalatenango and Morazan Provinces; here the insurgents are well entrenched, armed, and supplied. It is from these enclaves that any future offensive would probably be launched.

4. The five guerrilla organizations currently seem to be organized in the following manner:

— The Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) organization—roughly 1,500 to 2,000 strong—is concentrated in the Central Front, particularly in and around San Salvador and north to the Honduran border.

— The organization called Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN)—approximately 800 to 1,000 personnel—has moved its western-based forces eastward to take advantage of arms flows from the northeastern border with Honduras.

— The Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP)—perhaps 400 to 600 strong—also has its forces divided between west and east, with a large concentration reportedly now in the Eastern Front.

— The Communist Party Liberation Armed Forces (PCES-FAL)—probably fewer than 300 full-time combatants—tend to remain in the Central and Paracentral Fronts.

— The Central American Workers Revolutionary Party (PRTC)—perhaps 200 to 400 strong—seems to operate most often within the Central Front and along the northern border with Honduras.

5. These approximately 4,000 full-time guerrillas can quickly shift location. The small size of the country—roughly 260 kilometers long by 100 wide (160 by 60 miles)—and high insurgent mobility contribute to significant variation in personnel and weaponry in individual units at any one time. Guerrillas appear to travel extensively within certain regions, and personnel and weaponry are often exchanged and reassigned among units within the same organization.

6. While the insurgents traditionally have employed a vast array of hunting rifles, shotguns, and pistols, approximately one-half of the full-time com-

batants are equipped with grenade launchers. The best weaponry is utilized by more stationary field units—insurgent strongholds are consistently defended with fully automatic rifles, heavy machineguns, antitank rockets, mortars, grenades, and mines.

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### Insurgent Strongholds in El Salvador



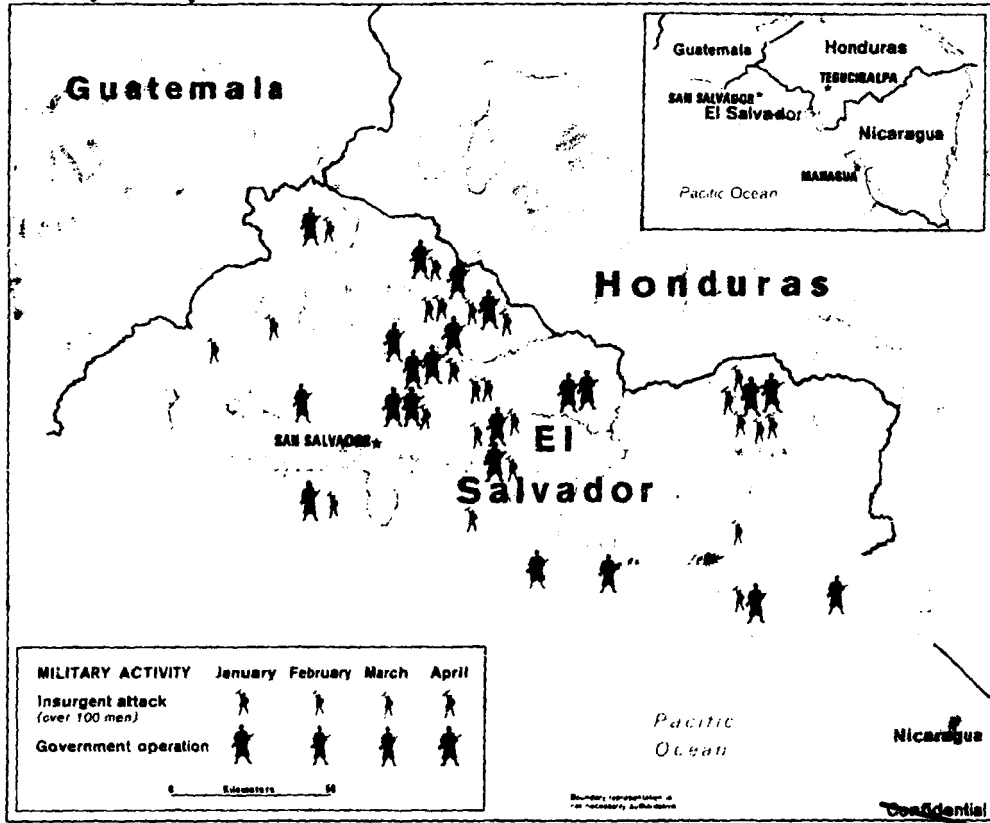
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### Military Activity in El Salvador



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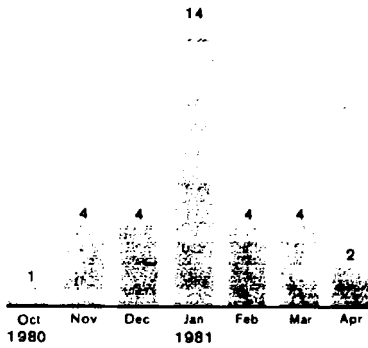
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## Military Operations in El Salvador

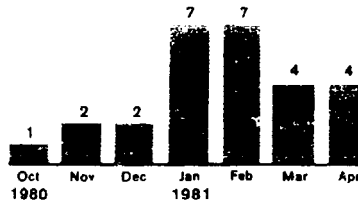
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**Insurgent Attacks\***  
Force of 100 men or more



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**Government Counterinsurgency Sweeps**



\*As of 6 May 1981 there had been no additional sizable insurgent attacks reported.

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