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**Latin America
Review**

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15 January 1988

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Guatemala: Counterinsurgency Operations [redacted]

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Two offensives in the western highlands by the Guatemalan Army since late September have disrupted insurgent supply lines and civilian support networks, kept the guerrillas off balance, and denied the rebels security in their traditional strongholds. The unprecedented use of task forces has improved the military's ability to control and coordinate multibattalion operations over large areas. Nevertheless, the Army has encountered some problems. The commitment of nearly one-fourth of its combat battalions has strained resources, task forces have been hamstrung by logistic difficulties, and many patrols have displayed poor tactical procedures. Neither offensive probably can be sustained beyond March, increasing the importance of consolidating gains through a continued military presence and more effective civil action programs to prevent a resurgence of guerrilla activity [redacted]

In September, the military launched simultaneous campaigns against insurgent strongholds in the western and northwestern highlands. [redacted]

[redacted] the operations were planned more than two years ago, when the high command prioritized the various insurgent threats. The General Staff had hoped to begin the first of three planned offensives—one against each of the Guatemalan rebel groups—in January 1986, but repeatedly postponed it because of insufficient logistic support. The Army, meanwhile, managed to contain the guerrillas in the sparsely populated highlands, [redacted] and in the northern jungle. Throughout this time, the military bolstered its presence in the insurgent areas with civic action programs designed to gain the support of the local Indian populations. [redacted]

Forces and Objectives

The military has committed nearly eight of its 32 combat battalions, organized into two task forces, to the operations. Task Force Xancatal, involving nearly three battalions, is operating in the Lake Atitlan area against some 100 guerrillas of the Revolutionary

Guatemalan Insurgents

Government pressure on the rebels—who number some 1,200 to 1,500 full-time combatants—has restricted their attacks largely to unpopulated areas. Battlefield reverses and a steady decline in popular and foreign support for the guerrillas since Guatemala's transition to civilian rule in January 1986 have led to debates among rebel leaders about strategy. The insurgents' proposals for a formal dialogue, which President Cerezo has refused unless the rebels lay down their arms and accept amnesty, reflect their concern that their military prospects are waning.

Factions	Leaders and Strengths	Area of Activity
Rebel Armed Forces (FAR)	Jorge Ismael Soto Garcia 400 to 500 members	Northern Guatemala
Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP)	Ricardo Ramirez de Leon 600 to 800 members	Northwestern Guatemala
Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA)	Rodrigo Asturias Amado 450 to 650 members	Southwestern Guatemala
Guatemalan Communist Party/Orthodox Faction (PGT/O)	Ricardo Rosales Roman fewer than 200, unarmed	Ties to urban labor

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Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA), who have been active laying mines, harassing civilian traffic, and assassinating local government officials. Task Force Kaibil Balam, involving five battalions, is facing a force of approximately 250 rebels and 200 additional supporters of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP)—which [redacted] the Army considers its most important target. The attache reports that both task forces are assigned to locate and destroy guerrilla forces, disrupt supply

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Guatemala: Rural Civic Action

The Guatemalan military believes that its civic action programs are crucial to gain Indian support and undercut the guerrillas. [redacted] civic action, coupled with the military's operations, has been successful in reducing local support for guerrillas in the task force areas. [redacted]

The mainstay of civic action has been the "poles of development" program in the northern highlands—initiated by the Army several years ago—which has attracted thousands of Indians to government-sponsored villages over the last few years. The program is considered particularly important in the northwest, where 45,000 Indian refugees who are living across the border in Mexico are an important source of supply for the guerrillas. The villages, however, are often surrounded by poor land, and there are no markets in the area to support large populations. Moreover, the Army is hard pressed to supply food and medicine, given its own logistic difficulties, and government funding is extremely limited. [redacted]

lines, and occupy rebel-held villages. In the past, counterinsurgency operations have been more diffused and limited in their objectives. [redacted]

The organization of these task forces was intended to improve command and control. [redacted] by allowing one commander to control battalions from several different military zones to concentrate their strength against specific rebel forces. Past operations had generally been limited to efforts within particular zones, with only occasional coordination between zone commanders for maneuvers along common borders. [redacted]

Tactical Successes

Sustained search-and-destroy missions by both task forces have kept the guerrillas off balance. Rebel supply lines have been seriously disrupted. [redacted] and the Army has maintained the tactical initiative. Using company-sized units that

have denied the rebels any numerical advantages in clashes, Guatemalan troops have been patrolling throughout the rebel areas and have uncovered numerous camps, arms caches, and field hospital sites. EGP and ORPA forces have been forced to move continuously; [redacted] their control over "liberated" areas has been sharply reduced. [redacted]

The offensives have also uprooted guerrilla support networks in the remote highlands. [redacted] the Army has confiscated about 75 percent of the EGP's harvest and has distributed it among the indigenous population. This has not only weakened the guerrillas but has improved the Army's relations with the Indians, who have historically distrusted Guatemalan forces and supported the guerrillas. The Army has tried to consolidate its gains with roadbuilding and assistance programs for Indians within the areas of operation. With the loss of their "liberated" areas, both the EGP and ORPA have lost considerable prestige. [redacted]

While trying to avoid major clashes with superior government forces, the guerrillas have put up stiff resistance to protect key base areas. For the most part, they have preferred to ambush military patrols only when they enjoy the advantage of terrain or numbers. [redacted] that the most persistent resistance has occurred near the northern villages of Caba and Amachel, which were EGP strongholds. Intense fighting in this area has contributed to significant casualties for Task Force Kaibil—34 dead and 53 wounded by the end of November—[redacted] The Army feels confident that the guerrillas suffered substantial casualties as well, but their losses cannot be verified because the insurgents carry off their dead and wounded. [redacted]

We believe the two offensives have significantly reduced the capabilities of both the EGP and ORPA in the western highlands. The occupation of their traditional bases has greatly diminished their political control over those regions and denied them the use of

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"liberated" areas from which to launch ambushes and sabotage attacks against government targets. The [redacted] that the rebels were surprised by the offensives and that their confidence has been badly shaken. The campaign also disrupted insurgent plans. The EGP, for example, had intended to launch its own offensive but instead had to retreat to jungle hideouts to escape Task Force Kaibil. [redacted] both task forces are continuing to choke guerrilla supply lines. [redacted]

Some Operational Problems

Despite these successes, sustaining simultaneous campaigns has strained the Army's manpower and materiel resources. [redacted] have noted that soldiers are tired, their boots are lasting only 30 days—forcing them to pack sneakers—and their old Galil rifles have worn chambers, reducing the accuracy of their fire. The General Staff, because of the relative quiet in the rest of the country, has rotated fresh troops into the areas of operation to retain the momentum. [redacted] the Army can maintain such a high pace of operations only until March or April before exhausting its resource base. [redacted]

The military has had problems providing adequate logistic support for the task forces, which are operating in remote areas at the end of the Army's supply line. The terrain is rugged, transport vehicles are limited, and helicopter support is severely constrained. [redacted] making resupply and troop transport difficult. Maintenance problems have often kept two-thirds of the Army's 33 helicopters grounded. Some soldiers have gone without food for days. [redacted] and, without helicopter transport, troop movements have been more susceptible to rebel ambushes. [redacted]

[redacted] has sometimes resulted in unnecessary casualties and failure to exploit opportunities. For example, Army patrols' frequent use of the same routes, failure to reconnoiter roads

and trails prior to movement, and poor security practices during marches make them more vulnerable to ambushes. [redacted]

[redacted] has helped the rebels stage ambushes and evade sweeps. While the [redacted] that artillery and air support has been adequate, a senior Guatemalan officer told him that patrols are often reluctant to call for available fire support. Furthermore, the senior officer criticized patrols for failing to react aggressively to ambushes. [redacted]

Outlook

[redacted] intends to press its advantage regardless of such difficulties. The continuing use of task forces will help to concentrate and coordinate forces in critical areas and keep pressure on the guerrillas, in our view. In addition, the Army's assistance to the Indian population in these regions should help to undermine the legitimacy of the guerrillas. [redacted]

Nevertheless, logistic problems, poor tactical execution, and continuing socioeconomic difficulties in the highlands are likely to prevent the Army from ending the EGP and ORPA insurgencies. We believe the Army will be forced to decrease the scale of operations and focus on consolidating its gains by maintaining a military presence for security and gaining more funding for civic action programs. The Army is unlikely to begin a planned major offensive against a third rebel force—the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR)—which operates in the remote Peten region until it has pacified the western highlands. We believe the Army will continue to press the government to seek more military aid from the United States to help alleviate logistic problems. [redacted]

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