

Death Squads Flex Muscle Again

El Salvador's Government Unable to Uproot Paramilitary Groups

By Douglas Farah

Washington Post Foreign Service

SAN SALVADOR, Oct. 12—When El Salvador's bloody 12-year civil war ended four years ago, the shadowy paramilitary groups responsible for thousands of killings were supposed to be disbanded, and a new police force formed to end decades of lawless violence and impunity.

But political, diplomatic and intelligence sources say powerful groups on the far right and the extreme left remain intact, despite the government's promise to eradicate them. The groups seek to destabilize the fragile peace process, the sources said, but they also run criminal organizations.

While the nation is not poised to return to war, the euphoria of peace has soured as the paramilitary groups have become more visible with political kidnappings, extortions, two car bombings and threatening communiques like those of the death squads in the 1980s.

There is a sense of disquiet and fear here not felt since the conservative government of the Republican Nationalist Alliance (Arena) and the Marxist-led Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) signed a United Nations-brokered peace agreement in 1992. That agreement slashed the size of the army, purged the most notorious human rights violators, disbanded the old security forces, and disarmed the FMLN and allowed it to become a legal political party. Arena's Armando Calderon Sol won the 1994 presidential election.

"We are extremely worried about the situation because of the increasing polarization," said Victoria Aviles, the government's human rights ombudsman, who has received death threats from the far right recently. "It seems the past is returning, where ideas are not fought with ideas, but with physical extermination. And there is still a mantle of impunity."

During the war, the United States

spent more than \$4 billion to support the government, while the Soviet Bloc supported the FMLN. Human rights groups say right-wing death squads murdered about 40,000 of the 70,000 people killed during the 1980-92 war.

Knowledgeable sources say there are now at least six sophisticated armed groups with extensive intelligence networks, responding to different political masters. While most are controlled by the far right, which is opposed to the peace process, the extreme left has at least one armed group.

The fears crystallized with the release last month after a year in harrowing captivity of the 14-year-old son of Saul Suster, a close friend of former president Alfredo Cristiani.

BY DAVID S. PHILLIPS

PHOTO BY AP/WIDEWORLD

Both men are leaders of Arena's moderate wing and are seen as traitors by the far right for negotiating with the FMLN.

"This kidnapping was very targeted, to show [the armed groups] could strike directly against those with power," said a source close to the far right. "They were showing they could get anyone, anywhere, and there was nothing the police or the government can do about it."

Since then, some wealthy families have sent their children abroad. As the threats have grown, political candidates have withdrawn their nominations, and human rights workers said hundreds of people have left the areas where the armed groups are most active.

The National Civilian Police, a cornerstone of the peace plan intended to break the links to the violent past here, has not dismantled the groups.

Several senior policemen have been linked to organized crime, and little progress has been made in purging the force of criminal elements. Even the few successes have

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been fleeting. In August, when police raided a restaurant where regional drug lords were meeting, they did not have enough manpower to seal the exits effectively and everyone escaped. All that was recovered was a painting, reportedly an original by Pablo Picasso.

In an August report to the U.N. Security Council, Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali warned of "increasing signs" that the police were becoming "an instrument of authoritarianism that is not accountable to the public."

U.N. officials are especially concerned because of the findings of a special U.N. commission mandated to study political violence in El Salvador. Its July 1994 report to President Calderon found there were "illegal, armed groups that carry out summary executions, threats and other acts of intimidation with political ends. . . . It would be impossible for these criminal structures to exist without the support of senior members of the security forces."

Calderon promised action. But a

diplomat who worked on the report said that so far, "we have not seen the political will by the government or the police to end these structures. The same report could be written today, only it is worse because now those people realize nothing will ever come of the investigation."

The deterioration comes as the U.N. mission, once numbering hundreds of monitors, has been reduced to four. And in the United States, El Salvador, once a major issue, has dropped off the agenda. There has been no U.S. ambassador since July, and it will take months for Congress to confirm a new one.

"It is the worst possible time for the United States not to have an ambassador here, because things are coming seriously unglued," said a senior FMLN leader. "They should not just walk away from us."

One paramilitary group, led by Hector Antonio Regalado, has caused particular alarm. According to U.S. intelligence reports and U.N. human rights investigations, Regalado and Arena party founder Roberto d'Aubuisson helped form right-wing death squads in the early 1980s. Regalado is a key suspect in the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, but an amnesty at the end of the war ended all cases against him.

Regalado has held meetings recently in south-central Usulután province with retired army officers bitter at the negotiated end to the war, and has visited senior military commanders, according to military sources. The sources said the group, led by two hard-line retired generals and an active-duty colonel, controls a heavily armed group active around the city of Berlin.

The group is not new, just more visible. A confidential appendix to the 1994 U.N. report described the group as pursuing "political and personal objectives, using illegal means, including violent methods," with the help of members of the local government and both retired and active army officers.

Leonel Gomez, who investigated some of the most notorious assassinations during the war, said the groups exist in part because a U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission, which investigated human rights abuses as part of the peace accords, omitted the names of most of those involved in death squad activity.

"I worry about Regalado, but I also worry about who funds Regalado," said Gomez. "When the names did not come out, those people thought someone in Washington was protecting them. The signal was, 'You are safe.' That was one of the most irresponsible actions surrounding the tragedy of the war."