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High-Level Arrest Marks

By Douglas Farah
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAN SALVADOR, July 29— For El Salvador's new police force, formed to replace the brutal security forces that killed and tortured thousands during the nation's bloody civil war, the news could hardly have been worse.

Investigations into the notorious Black Shadow death squad, which has claimed responsibility for the killings of a score of suspected thieves and delinquents in the past six months, led right to a senior officer of the new force.

"It is not easy for the director general to ask a subordinate to turn in his gun and badge," police director Rodrigo Avila said at a news conference this past week, announcing the arrest of Deputy Commissioner Cesar Flores-Murillo. "I did that this morning. It was difficult . . . but this shows the willingness of our institution to see justice done."

The case has caused an uproar here at a time when labor strikes and social unrest have led to almost daily confrontations between the police and protesters.

So far, 14 people, including four policemen, are under arrest for alleged participation in the Black Shadow group, which began announcing its executions for the purpose of "social cleansing" in January. Police have issued eight other arrest warrants. El Salvador's human rights ombudsman said this week that while there is not enough evidence to indicate that the new police force is involved as an institution in death-squad activity, indications of individual involvement are strong enough that they must be investi-

gated.

All of the 14 arrested officers were stationed in the city of San Miguel, about 100 miles east of here, where the group was created. Among those being held are Flores, who was a member of the National Police during the civil war and had been director of the new police in San Miguel from April 1994 until this May; three lower-ranking policemen; two

prominent businessmen, and an evangelical pastor. All are charged with aggravated homicide. All have declared their innocence.

What many find alarming is that elements within the National Civilian Police, created under one of the most far-reaching reforms in the peace pact that ended El Salvador's 12-year civil war in 1992, appear to have reverted to the habits of the force's feared predecessors so quickly. While the old National Police, Treasury Police and National Guard routinely "disappeared" people and helped make right-wing death squads the terror of the land, the new police force was, with U.S. training, to become a professional, clean force.

About 70,000 people died in the civil war, in which the U.S.-backed government fought the Marxist-led insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Approximately 40,000 of

the deaths were attributed by human rights groups to right-wing death squads, operating under the protection of the security forces. Today's death squads—Black Shadow is just one of several—so far have not targeted political enemies, instead killing people they consider to be common criminals and "antisocial elements." But supporters of the peace agreement bemoan the fact that the new death squads are showing the same brutal tactics and operating with the same degree of impunity as the wartime killers. The new death squads have made no secret of their activities; rather, they have detailed their deeds in faxes sent to local news media.

Ana Guadalupe Martinez, a former leader of the FMLN who is now a member of the National Assembly—the peace agreement allowed the FMLN to lay down its weapons and become a legal politi-

LD NEWS

Salvadoran Death Squad Probe



Marcher supporting death squads in San Salvador last week holds partially obscured sign reading: "For thieves there is justice, for honest people, prison."

BY ALEXANDER RODRIGOS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

cal party—said that, as disappointing as these developments were, things were better than before.

"Before, the police gave unconditional support to the death squads," Martinez said. "Now, for the first time, they are naming names of those involved and firing them. They are arresting not only those who pulled the trigger, but those who financed and planned the groups. That is important."

The executions carried out by the Black Shadow bear all the markings of earlier, right-wing death squads. The victims were usually taken by armed men in vehicles with darkened windows. The bodies were found along roadsides later, with their hands tied behind their backs and a single shot at the base of the skull.

"This is a challenge for our entire judicial system," said Marina de Aviles, the national human rights ombudsman. "There are

people in the new police force who do not understand the new philosophy, and they are the ones who are hurting the institution."

In response to the arrests, the Black Shadow issued a series of handwritten communiques, saying those arrested were innocent. The group threatened the lives of police officers and of reporters who reported on events in San Miguel.

But Aviles and others said the challenge was not just to prosecute those arrested, but to combat the popularity the Black Shadow enjoys because violent crime has become such an overwhelming problem here.

"People have lost all faith in the judicial system," Aviles said. "If people thought there would be investigations into crimes, and people would be punished, they would not support these groups. But we have a historic responsibility to

make sure the peace process here does not go backwards."

When the first arrests were announced, a group of residents of San Miguel marched in support of the group.

Mario Bettaglio, the governor of San Miguel province and member of the governing Republican Nationalist Alliance (Arena) party, this week publicly declared the Black Shadow a "necessary evil," and then said the group was "the Robin Hood of the people."

President Armando Calderon Sol, also of Arena, which in the past was accused of maintaining ties to death squads, publicly reprimanded Bettaglio, saying the governor's statements were "unfortunate." Bettaglio issued a statement Thursday saying he did not support the Black Shadow, and said any "doubts or misunderstandings my earlier statements produced should be laid to rest with this statement."

But FMLN leader Shafik Handal, in a television interview Wednesday, said both Bettaglio and his predecessor had openly supported the Black Shadow, and had even signed safe-conduct passes for some members of the group. The charge is being investigated by police.

"The question is whether the government, in any form, is going to continue to support illegal, armed groups that continue to act as death squads," Handal said. "We want a categorical answer, yes or no."

Police director Avila, who has won high marks during his tenure, was also angered by the public support for the Black Shadow.

"Some people are sympathetic to groups like the Black Shadow that carry out social cleansings," Avila said. "We know the problem of crime is very serious, . . . but anyone who kills in cold blood is a criminal. When someone takes the law into his own hands, we as a society run the serious risk of returning to our past, and the police will be the first to seek to eradicate those groups."