

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01004.ZNK
Date:	January 16, 2001
Subject:	El Salvador: Information on the Salvadoran Navy
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	El Salvador / Armed forces / Security forces / Counter-insurgency / Torture

Query:

What was the mission of the Salvadoran Navy during the civil war in the 1980s and what was its record with regard to human rights violations?

Response:

The principal base and training center of La Marina Nacional, the National Navy, was located in the far eastern department of La Unión along the coast of the Gulf of Fonseca, a 27-mile wide body of water which separates El Salvador and Nicaragua along the Pacific coast.

Prior to the war, the traditional mission of the Salvadoran Navy was preventing illegal fishing and controlling shrimp shipping. By the beginning of the 1980s, however, lack of spare parts had beached all but three of the navy's ten patrol boats, and the total of coast guard-type personnel was about two hundred. (Bosch 1999, 23-240)

With the civil war heating up, substantial increases in U.S. military assistance included the retraining and retooling of the Navy for counter-insurgency operations. The initial training was conducted by a contingent of U.S. Navy Seals who arrived in La Unión in early 1981. The U.S. also provided six piraña speedboats, essentially souped-up Boston Whaler-type craft outfitted with mounted M-60 machine guns and radar. (Jane's Intelligence Review, 1 November 1992; Life, March 1983)

The Navy's first combat-ready unit during the war was the Batallón de Fuerzas Especiales/Comandos Navales, Special Forces Battalion/Naval Commandos. It was trained in large part by the Seals and by late 1982 had more than 100 commandos divided into the Piraña and the Barracuda companies. Ten-year-old German G-3 rifles were replaced by mint-condition U.S. M-16s. The U.S. also provided grenade launchers, machine guns, anti-tank rockets and mortars. Members of this battalion would receive further training by U.S. Army Special Forces in Panama and by 1987 its size had increased to a full complement of about 450 men. (International Defense Review, 1 March 1991; Defense & Foreign Affairs, August-September 1986; Life, March 1983)

Beginning in the early 1980s the Salvadoran Navy had two principal missions: intercepting arms shipments coming in by water through the Gulf of Fonseca or by sea from Nicaragua to the FMLN guerrillas; and mounting amphibious attacks and small-unit ambushes on FMLN positions and conducting reconnaissance along the eastern coast of the country, particularly against guerrilla strongholds in the marshy southern portions and Jiquilisco Bay areas of Usulután department about 40-50 miles up the coast from La Unión. A secondary mission was to maintain small installations and guard the commercial port of Acajutla in Sonsonate department, the commercial port of La Libertad in La Libertad department, and the fishing port of El Triunfo in Jiquilisco Bay. (Life, March 1983; Defense & Foreign Affairs, August-September 1986; International Defense Review, 1 March 1991)

The Naval Commandos utilized the piraña boats to patrol the Gulf of Fonseca to interdict arms shipments, and to provide insertion, extraction and fire support during counter-insurgency operations along the coast. According to press reports, between 1982 and 1986 there were a number of combat engagements involving FMLN guerrillas and Salvadoran naval forces that either were on solo missions or were operating as part of some larger counter-insurgency operation usually involving aerial bombing and indiscriminate military attacks designed to terrorize civilians. (Defense & Foreign Affairs, August-September 1986; Associated Press, 7 May 1982; United Press International, 26 April 1984; United Press International, 15 June 1984)

Although the few press reports available and the El Rescate database do not single out Special Forces Battalion/Naval Commandos or either its Piraña or Barracuda company for human rights violations, the database does list a number of violations by the Navy between 1982 and 1985 when that battalion was the only naval unit involved in counter-insurgency. Moreover, in early March 1983, Life magazine quoted one of the U.S. Navy Seals on the difficulties in training the Salvadoran Naval Commandos: "I'm trying to show them the value of taking prisoners alive. You know how they interrogate? First they chop off the fingers, then the hands..." (Life, March 1983)

That is consistent with the subsequent admission to journalist Mark Danner by Gen. Adolfo Blandón, the Salvadoran armed forces chief of staff during much of the 1980s, that until 1983 it was military policy not to take prisoners, and with human rights reports which reveal that torture by the armed forces was routine both before and after 1983. (Danner, 1994; AI, 1981; AI, 1983, AI, 1987)

A second Navy combat unit, the "12 Octubre" Batallón de Infantería Marina (BIM), October 12th Naval Infantry Battalion, was formed in 1985 and was made up of at least four companies of about 100 men each. The BIM is specifically cited for human rights violations a number of times in the El Rescate database.

There also were allegations that the Salvadoran Navy was involved in supporting the Nicaraguan Contra insurgents who were fighting against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In one news report in March 1986, for example, Sandinista officials alleged that a Captain Melchor Palacios of the Salvadoran Navy was among a number of Salvadoran armed forces officers involved in training Nicaraguan Contras in the use of explosives to commit sabotage in Nicaragua. (Inter Press Service, 25 March 1986)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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Last Modified 06/14/2002