

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01002.ZNK
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Subject:	El Salvador: FMLN Guerrilla Attacks on Infrastructure and Commerce in San Miguel and the Response of the El Salvadoran Armed Forces Third Brigade
From:	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
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Query:

To what extent did the FMLN guerrillas target infrastructure and commerce during the 1980s and how did the Third Infantry Brigade, based in San Miguel department, fare in defending against such attacks?

Response:

Beginning in 1979, and especially from 1981 onward, the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) carried out a concerted campaign of economic sabotage, particularly in commercially important eastern departments such as San Miguel, which severely tested military units in the region, including the Third Infantry Brigade.

The Third Infantry Brigade was based in the city of San Miguel, the capital of San Miguel department in eastern El Salvador. The principal units of the Third Brigade were three *Batallones de Infantería Anti-Terrorista* (BIATs, Anti-Terrorist Infantry Battalions). They were named the Leon, Ponce and Cuscatlán Battalions and each had about 500-600 soldiers (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 14 Apr 1990).

At least as early as 1979, the FMLN sought to undermine the Salvadoran economy by targeting the nation's infrastructure. In 1981 guerrilla attacks on bridges, the electrical grid, farms, factories and other infrastructure became more intensive and systematic, particularly in San Miguel and the eastern half of the country, and included in October of that year the destruction of the Puente de Oro, a Coast Highway suspension bridge over the Lempa River. The Lempa divides the country in two and also defines the border between San Vicente and San Miguel departments (Baloyra 1982, 162; Montgomery 1995, 140-142, 151; UPI 13 Mar 1982).

By 1990, according to one estimate, the total cost of economic sabotage by the FMLN were greater than \$1 billion. Another estimate put the cost at more than \$1.5 billion. From 1981 until mid-1987, by one count, the FMLN destroyed or seriously damaged 83 of the country's 92 major bridges, including the Puente de Oro and the Cuscatlán (Pan American Highway), the country's two largest, both of which spanned the Lempa River and connected San Salvador to San Miguel and other eastern departments. By 1984 not a single culvert or bridge along the Coast Highway running through San Miguel and neighboring departments had escaped FMLN bombings (Stanley 1996, 238; UPI 11 Aug 1987; AP 20 Jan 1984; *Time* 6 Feb 1984).

Prior to destroying the Cuscatlán bridge with plastic explosives on New Year's Day in 1984, the FMLN had regularly attacked the span, launching almost nightly raids against

the structure during parts of 1982. The guerrillas also were able to dynamite power lines in San Miguel and other departments to such an extent that the eastern half of the country was often without electrical power. That further stretched the capacity of the Third Brigade whose units were assigned to protect infrastructure in the area, particularly along the Lempa River crossings. The FMLN on occasion also was able to penetrate military perimeters in attacks on the 15 de Septiembre hydroelectric dam located a half mile north of the Cuscatlán bridge on the Lempa River (AP 19 Aug 1982; UPI 18 Mar 1983; UPI 16 Sept 1983; *Newsweek*, 16 Jan 1984; AP 21 Jan 1984).

The Third Brigade was hard pressed as well to contend with the FMLN tactic of combining attacks on infrastructure and agricultural installations with assaults on military posts, including the Third Brigade barracks in the city of San Miguel. In September 1983, for example, the barracks came under heavy FMLN mortar fire, while simultaneously other FMLN units attacked in other parts of the city, carried out assaults against three bridges elsewhere in the department, shelled a sugar mill south of the city and destroyed a sugar plantation. Eighteen soldiers and twelve guerrillas were killed in the city, according to military sources. It was at least the third time the FMLN attacked the Third Brigade barracks within a twelve-month period (*Washington Post* 18 Mar 1984; AP 5 Sept 1983; UPI 7 Feb 1982).

Another frequent guerrilla target guarded by the Third Brigade was the railroad bridge running parallel to the Cuscatlán bridge over the Lempa River, particularly after the Cuscatlán bridge was destroyed, causing the government to detour commercial vehicular traffic onto the railroad trestle (UPI 9 May 1984; AP 12 Jan 1984).

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