

# El Salvador

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	SLV00005.ZSF
<b>Date:</b>	14 August 2000
<b>Subject:</b>	El Salvador: Belloso Battalion
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
<b>Keywords:</b>	El Salvador / Military operations / Military repression / Extrajudicial Executions / Massacres

## Query:

What is known about the Belloso Battalion and its record with regard to human rights?

## Response:

The Gen. Ramón Belloso Battalion was one of the six *Batallones de Infantería de Reacción Inmediata* (BIRIs, Rapid Reaction Infantry Battalions) formed in the early 1980s with the training and assistance of the United States. Five of the BIRIs belonged to the army-the Atlacatl, Arce, Atonal, Belloso, Bracamonte Battalions-while the *Batallón Aerotransportado* (Air Transport Battalion) was attached to the air force. The six BIRIs, all of them air mobile and each with about 1,000 specially trained men, were the backbone of the military's efforts against the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) guerrilla insurgency. They were arguably the most aggressive military units during the war, as is reflected in the high rate of human rights violations attributed to them in the El Rescate database on human rights violations during the El Salvadoran internal conflict, as discussed below (Jane's 1 Jan. 1993, 14 Apr. 1990).

The Belloso Battalion was formed in early 1982, the second BIRI created following the formation of the Atlacatl Battalion in 1981. The Belloso was trained at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, which was why it was nicknamed the "Gingo Battalion." It was based in the Zona San Bartolo, an area on the northern outskirts of San Salvador and, like the other BIRIs, had the capability for fast deployment to any of the country's fourteen departments (Boston Globe 14 Jul. 1996; UPI 22 Jan. 1983; AP, 17 Jan. 1983).

Among the BIRIs, the Atlacatl Battalion was the most notorious when it came to human rights violations, in part because it carried out the El Mozote massacre in Morazán department in December 1981 and the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in San Salvador in November 1989 (HRW 1991, 128, 182). But all of the BIRIs were geared for the same type of brutal tactics, particularly the systematic terrorizing of civilians in rural areas through what experts on repression in El Salvador have called a "strategy of mass murder" and "killing by zone" (Stanley 1996, 224-225; Danner 1994, 43).

The Belloso Battalion was involved in a number of massacres in the early 1980s. For example, in May 1982, only months after its formation, the Belloso and other army units were sent into eastern Chalatenango department in an offensive described by one analyst as "clearly aimed at civilians, most of whom supported the FMLN. Hundreds were killed, and the 5,000 who fled were unarmed" (Montgomery 1995, 152). One news report, based on eyewitness accounts, stated, "For a week, the troops killed hundreds of civilians, torched villages, burned crops and chased thousands of peasants into the mountains, where they survived on tortillas and, when necessary, leaves." (Boston Globe 14 Jul.

1996).

The El Rescate database indicates that the Belloso Battalion also carried out a massacre in Canton Tenango in Cuscatlán department in February 1983, with 29 extrajudicial killings or assassinations recorded. The database, which is extensive though not comprehensive, attributes a total of nearly 80 such killings to the Belloso Battalion between May 1982 and the end of 1985, as well as hundreds of other cases of abuse including torture, illegal capture and sexual assault. A majority of these violations, according to the database, were perpetrated during operations in Morazán and Cuscatlán, two of the most conflictive departments during the war (El Rescate Database, 1992).

Offensives aimed at civilians were often referred to by the Salvadoran military as "sweep-and-destroy" operations. The Belloso Battalion and the Atlacatl Battalion, in fact, combined on such an operation in San Vicente department in August 1982 (AP 18 Aug. 1982). The strategy of systematically targeting civilian populations in rural areas was based on the idea that, "Civilians who don't want to cooperate leave the area and those who remain are collaborating," as one army commander stated in 1984 (Montgomery 1995, 152).

It should be noted further that until 1983 the Salvadoran military in general "had a policy of killing captured guerrillas," which changed only slowly under pressure from U.S. military advisors. (Montgomery 1995, 173) As General Adolfo Blandón, the armed forces chief of staff for much of the 1980s, has stated, "Before 1983, we never took prisoners of war" (Danner 1994, 42).

After 1983, the military's tactics evolved. A primary goal remained the terrorizing of civilians to remove them from areas where the FMLN operated, but this was carried out increasingly by intensive aerial bombing (Montgomery 1995, 173). The BIRIs continued to spearhead operations on the ground, and though extrajudicial killing continued to occur, as indicated by the El Rescate database in the case of the Belloso Battalion, mass murder was no longer the policy and massacres became infrequent during the second half of the 1980s

As one analyst put it, beginning in 1984 the military compensated for reductions in killings by increasing its indiscriminate violence, both through aerial bombardment and ground assaults (Stanley 1996, 229). Evidence of this tactical adjustment can be found in the El Rescate Database. In the case of the Belloso Battalion, for example, from 1984 through 1990 the database shows a decline in assassinations and mass killings and an increase in "indiscriminate military attacks." The repression was no less deliberate or systematic, but the effect not as lethal (El Rescate database, 1992).

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*Last Modified 06/14/2002*