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1.4(B), 1.4(D)

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DRAFTED BY: P: CRAIG KELLY
APPROVED BY: S/S-O: CJMCMULLEN

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FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY TOKYO IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T STATE 138945

FOR U/S PICKERING - TOPOL 08272

FOLLOWING BOGOTA 06305 DATED JUL 19 SENT ACTION SECSTATE, PANAMA,
CARACAS, QUITO, BRASILIA, LIMA INFO DIRONDCP, JOINT STAFF, SECDEF,
USCINCSO MIAMI, DIA, CIA, NSC IS BEING REPEATED FOR YOUR ACTION.
QUOTE:

S E C R E T BOGOTA 006305

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/10
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, PINR, PTER, CO
SUBJECT: EL SALADO MASSACRE REVISITED IN LIGHT OF NEW
YORK TIMES ARTICLE

REF: A) BOGOTA 1594 B) IIR 6 819 0185 00 C) IIR 6 819
0255 00

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CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR CURTIS W. KAMMAN. REASONS: 1.5
(B&D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: ON JULY 14, A NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE
REVIEWED THE FEBRUARY 19-20 MASSACRE OF 37 PEOPLE AT THE
HANDS OF PARAMILITARIES IN EL SALADO, BOLIVAR DEPARTMENT,
ASSERTING THAT COLOMBIAN MILITARY AND POLICE FORCES STOOD
BY WHILE THE MASSACRE TOOK PLACE. THE GOVERNMENT OF
COLOMBIA'S PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE (FISCALIA) REACTED
TO THE ARTICLE, PROVIDING THE EMBASSY WITH SOME

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: ALAN H FLANIGAN
CLASSIFICATION: SECRET REASON: 1.4(B), 1.4(D)
DECLASSIFY AFTER: 20 JUL 2020
DATE/CASE ID: 22 DEC 2008 200800534

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON THE CASE, WHICH DETAILED THE
SUBSEQUENT CAPTURE OF SOME PARAMILITARIES INVOLVED IN EL
SALADO BY MILITARY FORCES. THE FISCALIA MAINTAINS AN
OPEN INVESTIGATION OF THE CASE.

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

THE
MINISTER OF DEFENSE HAS WRITTEN TO THE NEW YORK TIMES
STRONGLY DENYING ANY MISCONDUCT BY MILITARY FORCES. END
SUMMARY.

NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE DESCRIBES EL SALADO

2. (U) THE FEBRUARY 19-20 MASSACRE AT EL SALADO IS ONE OF
THE LARGEST IN RECENT MEMORY. PARAMILITARY FORCES ENTERED
THE TOWN OF EL SALADO AND MASSACRED 37 PEOPLE THEY
SUSPECTED OF BEING GUERRILLAS OR GUERRILLA SYMPATHIZERS.
(SEE REF A, EMBASSY REPORTING CABLE FOLLOWING THE ATTACK.)
THE JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE DESCRIBES THE MASSACRE

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IN DETAIL, INCLUDING INTERVIEWS WITH A DOZEN SURVIVORS.
THE ARTICLE ALSO FOCUSES ON POSSIBLE COLOMBIAN MILITARY
COMPLICITY DURING THE MASSACRE, NOTING THAT, ACCORDING TO
WITNESSES, MILITARY (MARINE) AND POLICE FORCES HAD BEEN ON
PATROL IN THE AREA BUT LEFT DAYS BEFORE THE MASSACRE. AS
REPORTED, ONCE THE MASSACRE BEGAN, MILITARY AND POLICE
UNITS DID NOTHING TO STOP IT, AND SET UP A ROADBLOCK
ESSENTIALLY PREVENTING HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIEF GROUPS FROM
ENTERING THE TOWN. THE ARTICLE STATES THAT RESIDENTS
BECAME CONVINCED THAT THE MILITARY WOULD NOT READILY
INTERVENE WHEN AT ONE POINT, PARAMILITARIES FLEW IN A
HELICOPTER TO RESCUE A MEMBER WHO HAD BEEN INJURED PULLING
PEOPLE OUT OF THEIR HOMES.

3. (U) ACCORDING TO THE ARTICLE, TOP MILITARY OFFICIALS
DECLARED THAT FIGHTING WAS UNDERWAY BETWEEN PARAMILITARIES
AND GUERRILLAS. FURTHERMORE, IN INTERVIEWS WITH COLOMBIAN
NAVY ADMIRALS, THE ARTICLE STATES THAT THE ROADBLOCKS WERE
ERECTED BY THE ARMED FORCES TO PREVENT MORE DEATHS OR
INJURIES TO THE CIVILIANS AT THE HANDS OF PARAMILITARIES.

COLONEL RODRIGO QUINONES

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4. (S) THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE SPECIFICALLY MENTIONS COLONEL RODRIGO QUINONES'S NAME. IT NOTES THAT DESPITE PENDING INVESTIGATIONS OF THE EL SALADO MASSACRE AND OTHER PAST HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES, HE, THE MARINE COLONEL IN CHARGE OF THE REGION AROUND EL SALADO, WAS RECENTLY PROMOTED TO GENERAL. ACCORDING TO THE ARTICLE, A FEBRUARY HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH REPORT, THE EMBASSY'S 1998 HUMAN RIGHTS

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REPORT, [REDACTED] COLONEL QUINONES, WHILE COMMANDER OF THE NAVAL INTELLIGENCE NETWORK, WAS "SEVERELY REPRIMANDED" (ALONG WITH THREE OTHER OFFICERS AND ONE NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER) BY THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE (THE PROCURADURIA, IN EFFECT, A GOC-WIDE INSPECTOR GENERAL) IN OCTOBER 1998 FOR THEIR ROLES IN ESTABLISHING, PROMOTING, FINANCING, AND FOMENTING PARAMILITARY GROUPS, AND FOR ASSISTING THESE GROUPS IN THE MURDER OF MORE THAN 50 PEOPLE IN AND AROUND THE CITY OF BARRANCABERMEJA, SANTANDER DEPARTMENT FROM 1993 TO 1994. (NOTE: THE SUPERIOR MILITARY TRIBUNAL EARLIER HAD EXONERATED QUINONES IN 1994. END NOTE.) THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OCTOBER 1998 FIRST-INSTANCE RULING WAS VALID AND EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, BUT SUBJECT TO A SECOND-INSTANCE REVIEW BY THE ATTORNEY GENERAL. THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, JAIME BERNAL CUELLAR, RECUSED HIMSELF FROM THE QUINONES CASE DUE TO PRIOR INVOLVEMENT. CONGRESS MUST APPOINT AN ACTING ATTORNEY

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GENERAL TO REVIEW THE FIRST-INSTANCE FINDING.

5. (U) THE ARTICLE FURTHER LINKS COLONEL QUINONES TO THE MASSACRE THROUGH AN APPARENT CLOSE ASSOCIATE, COLONEL HAROLD MANTILLA, COMMANDER OF THE FIFTH MARINE BATTALION THAT OPERATES IN THE AREA AROUND EL SALADO. ACCORDING TO RESIDENT TESTIMONY AND HUMAN RIGHTS WORKERS RECALLED IN THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, COLONEL MANTILLA'S UNIT WAS ONE OF THE UNITS THAT FAILED TO RESPOND TO THE MASSACRE. EMBASSY DOES NOT CURRENTLY POSSESS ANY INFORMATION ON COLONEL HAROLD MANTILLA.

COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES REPORT

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6. (S) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] THAT AFTER RECEIVING REPORTS OF TERRORIST ACTIVITY IN THE AREA, COUNTER-GUERRILLA COMPANIES WERE IMMEDIATELY

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DISPATCHED, EVENTUALLY CAPTURING ELEVEN PARAMILITARY MEMBERS AND KILLING TWO ON FEBRUARY 22 AT THE "LA ESMERALDA" RANCH. THE ELEVEN PARAMILITARIES WERE CAPTURED BY THE THIRD MARINE INFANTRY BATTALION, FIRST MARINE BRIGADE, UNDER THE COMMAND OF COLONEL RODRIGO QUINONES (SEE REF A). THE CAPTURED PARAMILITARY MEMBERS WERE TAKEN TO CARTAGENA AND TURNED OVER TO THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE (FISCALIA) FOR PROCESSING.

PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE REPLIES TO ARTICLE

7. (U) FOLLOWING PUBLICATION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, THE AMBASSADOR RECEIVED A LETTER ON 17 JULY FROM THE CIVILIAN DEPUTY PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE (VICE FISCAL) ON THE STATUS OF THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE EL SALADO MASSACRE. ACCORDING TO THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE, ON FEBRUARY 28, FOUR MORE ALLEGED PARAMILITARY MEMBERS WERE SUBSEQUENTLY CAPTURED, BRINGING THE TOTAL TO FIFTEEN THE FISCALIA INITIATED A FORMAL INVESTIGATION AND HAS ISSUED 15 ORDERS FOR PREVENTIVE DETENTION AGAINST THE PARAMILITARY MEMBERS. THE LETTER MAKES NO MENTION OF ANY PRESUMED MISCONDUCT BY THE MILITARY.

PUBLIC RESPONSE PLANNED

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8. (U) EMBASSY RECEIVED A COPY ON 19 JULY OF A LETTER SIGNED BY LUIS FERNANDO RAMIREZ, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, SENT TO THE NEW YORK TIMES IN RESPONSE TO THE PAPER'S JULY 14 EL SALADO ARTICLE (THE LETTER HAS NOT YET BEEN PUBLISHED). RAMIREZ REJECTED CLAIMS THAT COLOMBIAN MILITARY FORCES REMAINED INDIFFERENT DURING THE MASSACRE. IN HIS LETTER, HE STATES THAT MILITARY FORCES CONDUCTED OPERATIONS IN THE AREA WHICH RENDERED USELESS A BELL 206 RANGER HELICOPTER-GUNSHIP USED BY THE PARAMILITARIES, AND THAT THE NAVY HAD INFLICTED SEVEN CASUALTIES ON PARAMILITARY MEMBERS AND ARRESTED 15 (IT IS NOT CLEAR WHETHER THE CASUALTIES WERE KILLED OR WOUNDED). RAMIREZ FURTHER CLARIFIES IN HIS LETTER THE MILITARY'S USE OF A ROADBLOCK DURING THE MASSACRE, STATING THAT THREE SOLDIERS HAD SUFFERED SERIOUS INJURIES IN A GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY MINEFIELD AND THE ROADBLOCK WAS TO PREVENT FURTHER INJURIES.

9. (U) REGARDING THE REFERENCE TO COLONEL (NOW GENERAL)

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QUINONES IN THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, RAMIREZ STATES IN HIS LETTER THAT COLONEL QUINONES WAS IN BOGOTA WHEN THE MASSACRE OCCURRED. TO CLARIFY THE CASE AGAINST COLONEL QUINONES IN THE BARRANCABERMEJA DEATHS, RAMIREZ WROTE THAT COLONEL QUINONES HAD BEEN "WRONGLY ACCUSED." ACCORDING TO THE LETTER, COLONEL QUINONES HAD BEEN INVOLVED IN THE DISMANTLING OF THE MEDELLIN AND NORTE DEL VALLE DRUG CARTELS, AND AS A RESULT A NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER OF THE NAVY AND ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL WERE OFFERED A LOT OF MONEY TO MAKE ACCUSATIONS AGAINST COLONEL QUINONES. (NOTE: ACCORDING TO THE LETTER, THE TWO INDIVIDUALS EVENTUALLY WITHDREW THEIR ACCUSATIONS AND A LETTER FROM A WITNESS TO THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL REVEALED THAT THE TWO HAD BEEN

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OFFERED MONEY. END NOTE.) RAMIREZ CONFIRMS IN HIS LETTER THAT BOTH THE OFFICE OF MILITARY PENAL JUSTICE AND THE OFFICE OF THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL OPENED UP INVESTIGATIONS BASED ON THESE ACCUSATIONS. HE NOTES THAT WHILE THE MILITARY PENAL JUSTICE CLEARED HIM OF BOTH THE FIRST AND SECOND INSTANCES, THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL ISSUED A

REPRIMAND WHICH COLONEL QUINONES HAS APPEALED. (THIS APPEARS TO BE A MISTRANSLATION; THE ATTORNEY GENERAL APPARENTLY ISSUED THE REPRIMAND.)

[REDACTED]

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

10. (C) POLOFF MET WITH [REDACTED] ON 18 JULY TO DISCUSS THE EL SALADO CASE. [REDACTED]

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

[REDACTED] STATED THAT THE MONTES DE MARIA REGION (WHICH ENCOMPASSES EL SALADO) IS A VERY COMPLICATED BUT STRATEGIC AREA, LONG CONTESTED BY ALL ARMED GROUPS BECAUSE OF ITS VALUE AS A DRUG AND GUN-RUNNING CORRIDOR (SEE REF A). IT IS ALSO CONSIDERED A RESTING PLACE FOR GUERRILLAS. THE SATURATION OF ARMED ACTORS IN THE REGION HAS MADE IT DIFFICULT FOR THE ARMY TO PENETRATE THE AREA.

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

11. (C) [REDACTED] BELIEVES THAT THE ARMY LIKELY KNEW FROM INTELLIGENCE REPORTS THAT THE PARAMILITARIES WERE IN THE AREA, BUT LEFT PRIOR TO THE MASSACRE. THE PARAMILITARIES THEN ENTERED IN TRUCKS FROM MAGDALENA, WENT TO OVEJAS FIRST (SEE REF A)

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AND THEN ONTO EL SALADO, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] SPECULATED THAT THE MILITARY HAD BEEN LUCKY IN CAPTURING THE ELEVEN PARAMILITARY MEMBERS, STATING THAT THE MILITARY WAS ATTACKED AT LA ESMERALDA RANCH AND THEN PROCEEDED TO DETAIN ELEVEN PARAMILITARY MEMBERS AFTER SUCCESSFULLY OVERTAKING THEM.

12. (C) [REDACTED] CONFIRMED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE HAS ALSO UNDERTAKEN AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POSSIBILITY OF MILITARY COMPLICITY IN THE EL SALADO CASE. HOWEVER, [REDACTED] WERE CONCERNED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO COMPLETE INFORMATION OR ENOUGH SUPPORT TO PURSUE THE CASE ADEQUATELY. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] AND ECHOED IN THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, SOME OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE EL SALADO MASSACRE MAY HAVE BEEN FORCIBLY DISAPPEARED OR KILLED, THUS PROMPTING MANY TO REFRAIN FROM DISCUSSING THE CASE. ADDITIONALLY, [REDACTED]

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

[REDACTED] MENTIONED THAT THE DIRECTOR OF THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S TECHNICAL CORPS OF INVESTIGATORS (CTI) WAS THREATENED BY CARLOS CASTANO, HEAD OF THE AUC PARAMILITARY GROUP, AFTER VISITING THE EL SALADO AREA SHORTLY AFTER THE MASSACRE. [REDACTED] NOTED THAT THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE (PROCURADURIA GENERAL) HAD NOT YET INITIATED A FORMAL INVESTIGATION INTO EL SALADO.

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

13. (C) [REDACTED] SAID THAT BASED UPON INFORMATION FROM RELIABLE SOURCES, [REDACTED] FEARED ANOTHER ATTACK BY PARAMILITARIES IN CARMEN DEL BOLIVAR NEAR EL SALADO, POSSIBLY THIS WEEK.

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

1.4(B), 1.4(D)

COMMENT

14. (C) WHILE THE FISCALIA INVESTIGATION IS ONGOING, IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO REACH ANY DEFINITIVE CONCLUSION ABOUT THE DEGREE OF MILITARY COMPLICITY AT EL SALADO.

KAMMAN UNQUOTE SHERMAN

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