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BODY

TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, PINR, PTER, CO
SUBJECT: MILITARY GIVES THEIR VIEWS ON EL SALADO MASSACRE

REF: A) BOGOTA 06305 B) BOGOTA 1594 C) IIR 6 819 0185 00
D) IIR 6 819 0255 00

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ANNE PATTERSON. REASONS:
1.5(B&D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: ON AUGUST 8, POLOFFS WERE BRIEFED BY COLONEL CARLOS SANCHEZ GARCIA, CHIEF OF STAFF FOR THE NAVY'S 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE, ON THE BRIGADE'S DAY-BY-DAY ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO AND THROUGH THE FEBRUARY 19-20, 2000 EL SALADO MASSACRE. COLONEL SANCHEZ DENIED CHARGES OF MILITARYPARAMILITARY COMPLICITY ASSERTED IN A JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE (SEE REF A). HE STRESSED THAT THE BRIGADE RESPONDED TO ALL REPORTS OF GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY MOVEMENTS WITHIN THEIR JURISDICTION, BUT NEVER RECEIVED ADVANCE REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE PARAMILITARY ATTACK AGAINST EL SALADO. GENERAL RODRIGO QUINONES, COMMANDER OF THE NAVY'S 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE, WROTE TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STRONGLY DENYING ALLEGATIONS MADE BY A COLOMBIAN NGO THAT THE BRIGADE WAS INDIFFERENT TO PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REGION. GENERAL QUINONES ALSO REITERATED THAT THE BRIGADE HAD NOT RECEIVED REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE ATTACK AT EL SALADO. END SUMMARY.

1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE

2. (U) COLONEL CARLOS SANCHEZ GARCIA, CHIEF OF STAFF FOR THE NAVY'S 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE, DESCRIBED THE BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION (WHICH INCLUDES EL SALADO) AS A JUNGLE ZONE, RUGGED, MOUNTAINOUS, AND HARD TO TRAVERSE.

6. (U) ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ, ON FEBRUARY 17, THE BRIGADE RELAYED, VIA RADIO TO THE NAVAL COMMAND, THAT 13 PEOPLE HAD BEEN FOUND DEAD IN AND AROUND EL SALADO IN CARMEN DE BOLIVAR MUNICIPALITY (BOLIVAR) AND IN THE VILLAGES OF FLOR DEL MONTE, SAN RAFAEL AND CANUTAL IN OVEJAS MUNICIPALITY (SUCRE). THE 31ST MARINE BATTALION WAS ORDERED TO THESE AREAS AND THE BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS REQUESTED THAT THE NATIONAL POLICE IN SUCRE ALSO SEND UNITS. THE NATIONAL POLICE WERE UNAVAILABLE, HOWEVER, AS THEY WERE PROVIDING SECURITY FOR A SENATORIAL COMMISSION IN SINCELEJO, SUCRE DEPARTMENT, THE FOLLOWING DAY.

7. (U) COLONEL SANCHEZ STATED THAT ON THE MORNING OF FEBRUARY 18, A MARINE COMPANY WAS ORDERED TO CONTROL THE ROAD FROM CARMEN DE BOLIVAR TO THE VILLAGE OF EL SALADO, AND UNIT COMMANDERS WERE ASKED TO TRY TO GAIN MORE INFORMATION ON THE REPORTED DEATHS IN THE AREA. THE BRIGADE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE IN CARTAGENA THAT APPROXIMATELY 80-100 AUC PARAMILITARIES HAD INITIATED ACTIONS IN THE AREA BETWEEN THE MUNICIPALITIES OF SAN JACINTO AND CARMEN DE BOLIVAR. ADDITIONALLY, THE BRIGADE RECEIVED A LETTER FROM THE SUCRE POLICE COMMAND STATING THAT 7 PEOPLE HAD BEEN KILLED ON FEBRUARY 16 IN THE AREAS OF FLOR DEL MONTE, CANUTAL, CANUTALITO, EL CIELITO AND LA PENA IN THE MUNICIPALITIES OF OVEJAS AND SAN PEDRO (SUCRE). (NOTE: IT IS UNCLEAR IF THESE 7 ARE PART OF OR IN ADDITION TO THE 13 FOUND ON FEBRUARY 17. HOWEVER, RESIDENTS OF CANUTALITO, EL CIELITO AND LA PENA WERE NOT MENTIONED IN THE FEBRUARY 17 DEATHS. END NOTE.) TWO NATIONAL POLICE REPORTS STATED THAT THE DEATHS WERE COMMITTED BY APPROXIMATELY 100-120 ARMED INDIVIDUALS WEARING THE CAMOUFLAGED UNIFORMS OF THE MILITARY FORCES AND THE NATIONAL POLICE. (NOTE: THERE IS STRONG EVIDENCE OF ILLEGAL ARMED GROUPS OFTEN WEARING MILITARY/POLICE UNIFORMS FOR COVER. END NOTE.)

8. (U) COLONEL SANCHEZ TOLD POLOFFS THAT RODRIGO QUINONES CARDENAS, THE SENIOR COMMANDER OF THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE, RETURNED FROM BOGOTA ON FEBRUARY 18 TO ASSESS THE SITUATION AND IMMEDIATELY ORDERED TROOPS TO EL SALADO AND FLOR DEL MONTE AND EVENTUALLY TO BONGA, SAN PEDRO AND CANUTALITO. ON FEBRUARY 19, COLONEL SANCHEZ SAID THAT A CELLULAR TELEPHONE CALL BETWEEN MARTIN CABALLERO, HEAD OF THE 37TH FARC FRONT, AND AN UNKNOWN INDIVIDUAL WAS INTERCEPTED IN WHICH CABALLERO STATED THAT THE FARC FOUGHT THE PARAMILITARIES FOR 72 HOURS IN THE GENERAL AREA OF EL SALADO, FLOR DEL MONTE, CANUTAL, CANUTALITO, AND BAJOGRANDE, AND KILLED 27 PARAMILITARY MEMBERS. AT 6:00 P.M. THAT EVENING, THE ORCA COMPANY OF THE BRIGADE'S 31ST BATTALION FOUND 16 BODIES IN AND AROUND EL SALADO. THE COMPANY ESTABLISHED A COMMAND POST IN THE AREA.

1ST BRIGADE'S RESPONSE

9. (U) IN THE EARLY MORNING ON FEBRUARY 20, THE BRIGADE REPORTEDLY ASKED THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S TECHNICAL INVESTIGATIVE CORPS (CTI) FROM CARMEN DE BOLIVAR TO REMOVE THE BODIES FOUND IN EL SALADO. THE BRIGADE REQUESTED A HELICOPTER TO ASSIST THE CTI BUT NONE WERE

GENERAL'S OFFICE (PROCURADURIA), RESPONDING TO THE CODHES LETTER (NOTE: EMBASSY RECEIVED A COPY OF HIS LETTER AND THE CODHES LETTER FROM GENERAL QUINONES. GENERAL QUINONES NOTED TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL THAT HE NEVER FORMALLY RECEIVED THE CODHES LETTER ADDRESSED TO HIM. END NOTE.) IN HIS LETTER, GENERAL QUINONES ECHOED COLONEL SANCHEZ IN DESCRIBING THE DIFFICULT TERRAIN MANAGED BY THE BRIGADE AND THE ARMED GROUPS FOUND IN THE REGION. HE ALSO STRESSED THAT THE BRIGADE DID NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO COVER SUCH A LARGE JURISDICTION 24 HOURS A DAY. HOWEVER, GENERAL QUINONES NOTED THAT DAY AFTER DAY, THE "SACRIFICE" OF ALL THE INDIVIDUALS THAT COMPRISE THE 1ST BRIGADE IS CONSTANT IN ORDER TO COMBAT ARMED GROUPS AND BRING PEACE TO THE REGION.

14. (U) IN THEIR LETTER, CODHES STATED THAT THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE HAD A "PARTICULAR DUTY TO PROTECT EL SALADO," TO WHICH GENERAL QUINONES RESPONDED THAT EL SALADO HAD NOT BEEN AN AREA OF VIOLENT ACTIVITY OR MURDERS FOR SOME TIME. GENERAL QUINONES ALSO STRESSED THAT THE BRIGADE HAD NOT RECEIVED ANY REPORTS THAT EL SALADO WAS A POSSIBLE TARGET FOR EITHER A GUERRILLA OR PARAMILITARY ATTACK. GENERAL QUINONES ASSERTED THAT THE PARAMILITARIES THAT COMMITTED THE MASSACRE AT EL SALADO WERE NOT BASED IN THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION, BUT RATHER OPERATE OUT OF MAGDALENA AND CORDOBA DEPARTMENTS, ENTERING SUCRE AND BOLIVAR DEPARTMENTS TO COMMIT CRIMES. GENERAL QUINONES REMARKED THAT ALTHOUGH THESE GROUPS ARE NOT BASED IN THE 1ST BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION, HE HAS THE PARTICULAR AND CONSTITUTIONAL DUTY TO COMBAT AND NEUTRALIZE ALL GROUPS ON THE MARGINS OF THE LAW.

15. (U) FINALLY, GENERAL QUINONES EMPHASIZED THAT THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE HAS DEMONSTRATED CLEAR RESULTS IN COMBATING PARAMILITARIES AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, IS LEADING A COMMITTEE TO ASSIST WITH THE DISPLACED IN SUCRE DEPARTMENT, AND IS COLLABORATING WITH THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL AND ATTORNEY GENERAL TO GATHER PROOF FOR THEIR PENAL AND DISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATIONS INTO WHAT HAPPENED AT EL SALADO.

COMMENT

16. (C) COMMENT: COLONEL SANCHEZ STATED THAT HIS PURPOSE WAS TO PRESENT THE EMBASSY WITH THE BRIGADE'S VERSION OF EVENTS SURROUNDING EL SALADO AND DISPUTE ALLEGATIONS MADE IN THE JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE. BECAUSE COLONEL SANCHEZ WAS DISPATCHED FOR THIS PURPOSE, HIS REPORT SHOULD BE TAKEN WITH A GRAIN OF SALT. HOWEVER, COLONEL SANCHEZ'S POINT THAT THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE,

/***** BEGINNING OF SECTION 004 *****/

LIKE MANY IN THE ARMED FORCES, IS OVERWORKED, UNDER-RESOURCED, AND SPREAD THINLY THROUGHOUT THEIR JURISDICTION IS UNDENIABLE. REGARDLESS, IT IS DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE THAT THE TOWN OF EL SALADO HAD NOT BEEN SUBJECT TO THREATS OF AN ATTACK PRIOR TO THE MASSACRE, CONSIDERING THE TOWN IS SITUATED IN A HIGH CONFLICT AREA. POST MAINTAINS A COPY OF THE BRIGADE'S MOVEMENTS AND COPIES OF THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL, POLICE, AND

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ADMINISTRATIVE DEPARTMENT OF SECURITY REPORTS ON THE
EVENTS. END COMMENT.

PATTERSON
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ADMIN

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