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ACTION WHA-00

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/10
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

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

1. (C) SUMMARY: ON AUGUST 8, POLOFFS WERE BRIEFED BY

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[REDACTED] ON THE BRIGADE'S DAY-
BY-DAY ACTIVITIES PRIOR TO AND THROUGH THE FEBRUARY 19-
20, 2000 EL SALADO MASSACRE. [REDACTED] DENIED
CHARGES OF MILITARY-PARAMILITARY COMPLICITY ASSERTED IN A
JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE (SEE REF A). HE STRESSED
THAT THE BRIGADE RESPONDED TO ALL REPORTS OF GUERRILLA

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: SAM A. MOSKOWITZ
DATE/CASE ID: 27 JUN 2001 200100677

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AND PARAMILITARY MOVEMENTS WITHIN THEIR JURISDICTION, BUT NEVER RECEIVED ADVANCE REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE PARAMILITARY ATTACK AGAINST EL SALADO. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] 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.

[REDACTED] ALSO REITERATED THAT THE BRIGADE HAD NOT RECEIVED REPORTS OF A POSSIBLE ATTACK AT EL SALADO. END SUMMARY.

1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE

2. (U) [REDACTED] DESCRIBED THE BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION (WHICH INCLUDES EL SALADO) AS A JUNGLE ZONE, RUGGED, MOUNTAINOUS, AND HARD TO TRAVERSE. THE REGION IS STRATEGIC FOR ALL ARMED GROUPS INCLUDING [REDACTED]

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 THE 35TH AND 37TH FARC FRONTS, THE ELN, THE EPL, THE ERP AND THE AUC PARAMILITARY GROUP. [REDACTED] STATED THAT MANY OF THE ROADS ARE MINED AND THERE IS A GENERAL LACK OF TRANSPORTATION WITH NO ACCESS TO HELICOPTERS, REQUIRING THE BRIGADE TO WALK THROUGH THE JUNGLE AND CARRY ITS OWN FOOD AND WATER. ADDITIONALLY, THE BRIGADE'S COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM IS RUDIMENTARY. (NOTE: THIS IS FAIRLY STANDARD FOR ALL COLOMBIAN ARMED FORCES. END NOTE.)

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1ST BRIGADE SPREAD THIN PRIOR TO MASSACRE

3. (U) [REDACTED] A WRITTEN ACCOUNT OF THE EVENTS FROM FEBRUARY 15 ONWARD, INCLUDING THE BRIGADE'S MOVEMENTS, REPORTS OF POSSIBLE ATTACKS, AND DOCUMENTATION FROM VARIOUS SOURCES, INCLUDING LOCAL PROSECUTOR GENERAL OFFICES, REGIONAL POLICE COMMANDS AND ADMINISTRATIVE DEPARTMENT SECURITY OFFICES. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] ALSO VERBALLY DESCRIBED TO POLOFFS THE 1ST BRIGADE'S DAY-BY-DAY ACTIVITIES, EMPHASIZING THAT THE BRIGADE RESPONDED TO ALL REPORTED PARAMILITARY AND GUERRILLA ACTIVITY. [REDACTED] STATED THAT NUMEROUS INTELLIGENCE REPORTS OF GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY SPREAD THE BRIGADE AND ITS LIMITED RESOURCES THINLY THROUGHOUT ITS JURISDICTION DURING THE WEEK

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LEADING UP TO THE EL SALADO MASSACRE.

4. (U) ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] THE BRIGADE RECEIVED MULTIPLE REPORTS OF GUERRILLAS PRESENT THROUGHOUT THE BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION FROM FEBRUARY 15
CONFIDENTIAL

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ONWARD. REPORTS WERE RECEIVED OF POSSIBLE FARC ATTACKS AGAINST THE TOWNS OF ZAMBRANO AND CORDOBA, IN THE AREAS BETWEEN THE VILLAGES OF LAS PIEDRAS (ARENAL) AND SAN PABLO (MARIA LA BAJA), AND IN AND AROUND THE MUNICIPALITY OF CARMEN DE BOLIVAR, ALL IN NORTHEAST BOLIVAR DEPARTMENT. THE BRIGADE ALSO RECEIVED REPORTS OF A GUERRILLA ROADBLOCK ON THE HIGHWAY NEAR OVEJAS MUNICIPALITY IN SUCRE DEPARTMENT. [REDACTED] STATED THAT THE BRIGADE DISPATCHED TROOPS TO COVER THESE AREAS AND DISMANTLE THE BLOCKADE. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] INTELLIGENCE WAS RECEIVED NOTING THAT THE PARAMILITARIES HAD ENGAGED IN COMBAT WITH THE GUERRILLAS THROUGHOUT THE AREA, RESULTING IN THE DEATH OF 45 GUERRILLAS.

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5. (U) ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] THE BRIGADE ALSO RECEIVED REPORTS ON FEBRUARY 16 OF A BLUE AND WHITE BELL RANGER HELICOPTER, BELIEVED TO BELONG TO THE AUC PARAMILITARIES, FLYING IN THE AREA OF CORDOBA IN NORTHEASTERN BOLIVAR DEPARTMENT. THE BRIGADE REQUESTED FLIGHT PLANS IN THE AREA AND ORDERED TROOPS TO BE ON MAXIMUM ALERT IN ORDER TO NEUTRALIZE A POSSIBLE ATTACK. [REDACTED] SAID THAT MARINE INFANTRY TROOPS, WITH THE HELP OF THE COLOMBIAN AIR FORCE (FAC) BASED OUT OF BARRANQUILLA, DOWNED THE HELICOPTER THAT AFTERNOON.

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[REDACTED]

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AC-01 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OIC-02 OMB-01 PA-00 PM-00
PRS-00 ACE-00 P-00 SCT-00 SP-00 SS-00 STR-00
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/10
 TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, PINR, PTER, CO

SUBJECT: MILITARY GIVES THEIR VIEWS ON EL SALADO MASSACRE

REPORTS OF DEATHS IN AND AROUND THE EL SALADO AREA
 ██████████

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6. (U) ACCORDING TO ██████████ ON FEBRUARY 17, THE B6
 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) ██████████ STATED THAT ON THE MORNING OF B6
 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

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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 PENNA WERE NOT MENTIONED IN [REDACTED])

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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) [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] IMMEDIATELY ORDERED TROOPS TO EL SALADO AND FLOR DEL MONTE AND EVENTUALLY TO BONGA, SAN PEDRO AND CANUTALITO. [REDACTED]

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THE FARC FOUGHT THE PARAMILITARIES FOR 72 HOURS IN THE GENERAL AREA OF EL SALADO, FLOR DEL MONTES, 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 [REDACTED]

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REMOVE THE BODIES FOUND IN EL SALADO. THE BRIGADE REQUESTED A HELICOPTER TO ASSIST THE CTI BUT NONE WERE AVAILABLE UNTIL APPROXIMATELY 3:00 P.M. LATER THAT DAY. [REDACTED] STATED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S REPRESENTATIVE DECIDED NOT TO TRAVEL BECAUSE 3:00 P.M. WOULD BE TOO LATE. (NOTE: ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] THE CTI EVENTUALLY VISITED EL SALADO ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY

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21 VIA A NATIONAL POLICE HELICOPTER, BUT THE BODIES HAD BEEN PREVIOUSLY BURIED. END NOTE.)

10. (U) ACCORDING TO THE BRIGADE'S TRANSCRIPTS, ON FEBRUARY 21, THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE, THROUGH ITS 31ST BATTALION, PROVIDED APPROXIMATELY 600 KILOS OF SUPPLIES FOR THE COMMUNITY OF EL SALADO. THE BRIGADE ALSO ORDERED THE 31ST AND 33RD BATTALIONS TO PURSUE THE PARAMILITARIES AND PREVENT THEM FROM LEAVING THE AREA.

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[REDACTED] REPORTEDLY REQUESTED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE IN SINCELEJO CONDUCT AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE MASSACRE. ACCORDING TO [REDACTED] AND REF A, DURING THE EARLY MORNING OF FEBRUARY 22, THE MARINES ENGAGED IN COMBAT WITH PARAMILITARY MEMBERS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF ZAMBRANO, AND CAPTURED 11 PARAMILITARY MEMBERS WHOM THEY HANDED OVER TO THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE (FISCALIA) IN CARTAGENA FOR

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] PTQ8854

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PROCESSING (SEE REF A).

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11. (U) [REDACTED] EMPHASIZED THAT THE 1ST MARINE INFANTRY BRIGADE DID NOT RECEIVE ANY PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF AN ATTACK IN OR AROUND THE AREA OF EL SALADO. HE REITERATED THAT THE BRIGADE RESPONDED TO ALL REPORTED PARAMILITARY AND GUERRILLA ACTIVITY, AND FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE SITUATION IN EL SALADO WHEN IT LEARNED OF THE 13 DEAD BODIES FOUND IN THE AREA. [REDACTED] STRESSED THAT THE BODIES WERE NOT ALL FOUND IN EL SALADO, BUT THROUGHOUT THE AREAS OF FLOR DEL MONTE, CANUTAL, CANUTALITO, EL CIELITO AND LA PENNA.

12. (U) [REDACTED] ALSO STATED THAT CONTRARY TO THE JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, [REDACTED]

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HE ALSO STRESSED THAT THE ROADBLOCK MENTIONED IN THE ARTICLE WAS TO PROTECT CARMEN DE BOLIVAR FROM A REPORTED POSSIBLE GUERRILLA ATTACK ON FEBRUARY 17, NOT TO PREVENT HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIEF GROUPS FROM ENTERING AND AIDING EL SALADO (SEE REF A).

[REDACTED] RESPONDS TO CODHES' ASSERTIONS

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13. (U) IN A LETTER TO THE COMMANDER OF THE NAVAL ATLANTIC FORCES [REDACTED] THE COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DISPLACEMENTS (CODHES), A COLOMBIAN NGO, STATED THAT THE PUBLIC FORCES IN THE MONTES DE MARIA [REDACTED]

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REGION (COVERED BY THE 1ST BRIGADE) SHOWED "INDIFFERENCE, SLOWNESS, AND INACTIVITY" TOWARDS PROTECTING THE CIVILIAN POPULATION FROM HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING THE MASSACRE. [REDACTED] WROTE TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OFFICE (PROCURADURIA), RESPONDING TO THE CODHES LETTER (NOTE: EMBASSY RECEIVED A COPY OF HIS LETTER AND THE CODHES LETTER [REDACTED])

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[REDACTED] NOTED TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL THAT HE NEVER B6
FORMALLY RECEIVED THE CODHES LETTER ADDRESSED TO HIM.
END NOTE.) IN HIS LETTER, [REDACTED] ECHOED
[REDACTED] 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, [REDACTED] NOTED THAT DAY B6
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 B6
EL SALADO," TO WHICH [REDACTED] RESPONDED THAT EL
SALADO HAD NOT BEEN AN AREA OF VIOLENT ACTIVITY OR
MURDERS FOR SOME TIME. [REDACTED] ALSO STRESSED
THAT THE BRIGADE HAD NOT RECEIVED ANY REPORTS THAT EL
SALADO WAS A POSSIBLE TARGET FOR EITHER A GUERRILLA OR
PARAMILITARY ATTACK. [REDACTED] 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
[REDACTED]

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DEPARTMENTS TO COMMIT CRIMES. [REDACTED] 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, [REDACTED] EMPHASIZED THAT THE B6
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

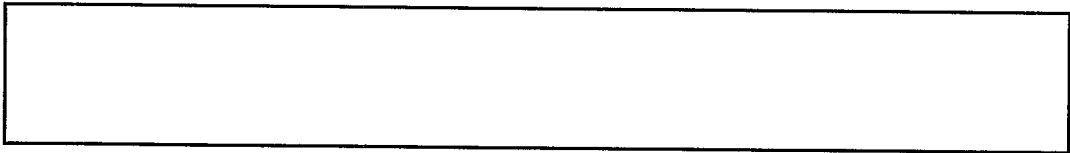
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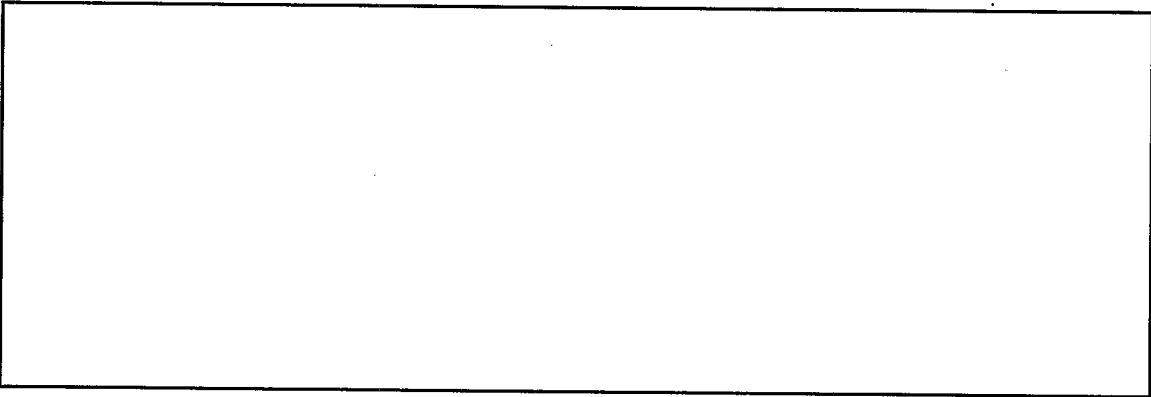
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