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CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 04 BOGOTA 007462

E.O. 12958: 08/18/10

/*********** THIS IS A COMBINED MESSAGE *********/

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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.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE REVIEW AUTHORITY: NORMAN M BOUTON DATE/CASE ID: 21 FEB 2008 200601036

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THE REGION IS STRATEGIC FOR ALL ARMED GROUPS INCLUDING THE 35TH AND 37TH FARC FRONTS, THE ELN, THE EPL, THE ERP AND THE AUC PARAMILITARY GROUP. COLONEL SANCHEZ 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.)

1ST BRIGADE SPREAD THIN PRIOR TO MASSACRE

- 3. (U) COLONEL SANCHEZ GAVE POLOFFS 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ STATED THAT NUMEROUS INTELLIGENCE REPORTS OF GUERRILLA AND PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY SPREAD THE BRIGADE AND ITS LIMITED RESOURCES THINLY THROUGHOUT ITS JURISDICTION DURING THE WEEK LEADING UP TO THE EL SALADO MASSACRE.
- 4. (U) ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ, THE BRIGADE RECEIVED MULTIPLE REPORTS OF GUERRILLAS PRESENT THROUGHOUT THE BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION FROM FEBRUARY 15 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ STATED THAT THE BRIGADE DISPATCHED TROOPS TO COVER THESE AREAS AND DISMANTLE THE BLOCKADE. ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ, INTELLIGENCE WAS RECEIVED NOTING THAT THE PARAMILITARIES HAD ENGAGED IN COMBAT WITH THE GUERRILLAS THROUGHOUT THE AREA, RESULTING IN THE DEATH OF 45 GUERRILLAS.
- 5. (U) ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ, 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ SAID THAT MARINE INFANTRY TROOPS, WITH THE HELP OF THE COLOMBIAN AIR FORCE (FAC) BASED OUT OF BARRANQUILLA, DOWNED THE HELICOPTER THAT AFTERNOON.

/****** BEGINNING OF SECTION 002 ******/
REPORTS OF DEATHS IN AND AROUND THE EL SALADO AREA

- 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 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 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ STATED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S REPRESENTATIVE.DECIDED NOT TO TRAVEL BECAUSE 3:00 P.M. WOULD BE TOO LATE. (NOTE: ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ, THE CTI EVENTUALLY VISITED EL SALADO ON MONDAY, FEBRUARY 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. LIEUTENANT COLONEL HAROLD MANTILLA SERRANO, COMMANDER OF THE 5TH MARINE RIFLE BATTALION, REPORTEDLY REQUESTED THAT THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE IN SINCELEJO CONDUCT AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE MASSACRE. ACCORDING TO COLONEL SANCHEZ 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

/****** BEGINNING OF SECTION 003 ******/
PROCESSING (SEE REF A).

COLONEL SANCHEZ DEFENDS HIS UNIT

11. (U) COLONEL SANCHEZ 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. COLONEL SANCHEZ 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 PENA.

12. (U) COLONEL SANCHEZ ALSO STATED THAT CONTRARY TO THE JULY 14 NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE, COLONEL, NOW GENERAL, QUINONES WAS IN BOGOTA, NOT IN THE 1ST BRIGADE'S JURISDICTION DURING THE TIME OF THE EL SALADO MASSACRE. 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).

GENERAL QUINONES RESPONDS TO CODHES' ASSERTIONS

13. (U) IN A LETTER TO THE COMMANDER OF THE NAVAL ATLANTIC FORCES AND COLONEL QUINONES, THE COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DISPLACEMENTS (CODHES), A COLOMBIAN NGO, STATED THAT THE PUBLIC FORCES IN THE MONTES DE MARIA REGION (COVERED BY THE 1ST BRIGADE) SHOWED "INDIFFERENCE, SLOWNESS, AND INACTIVITY" TOWARDS PROTECTING THE CIVILIAN POPULATION FROM HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS DURING THE MASSACRE. GENERAL QUINONES WROTE TO THE ATTORNEY

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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, UNDERRESOURCED, 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

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

PATTERSON BT

SUBJECT

MILITARY GIVES THEIR VIEWS ON EL SALADO MASSACRE

ADMIN

#9051

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