

No glasnost ... only guns

Savage, street-to-street fighting this week in bullet-riddled downtown San Salvador comes as a nasty reminder that not all communists are of the smiling Gorbachev variety.

While everyone was busy watching the Berlin Wall crumble, Marxist rebels in El Salvador launched a mini-Tet offensive that has produced the heaviest fighting in that nation's bloody, decade-old civil war.

Some 2,000 guerrillas of the Marxist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, stormed into El Salvador's seedy capital, attacking government buildings and homes of non-communist officials. So far, more than 500 have died and 1,000 have been wounded in the intense fighting.

I had a taste of the FMLN's tactics during my recent visit to San Salvador. Bombs were going off periodically. Gunfire could be heard around the capital. Most of the city's electricity had been knocked out by the FMLN. I wrote my column by candlelight as occasional explosions lit up the night sky.

Down in the hotel bar, I chatted with a group of CIA men about which side of the hotel would be most likely to be hit by rockets. They would not leave the hotel for fear of terrorist attacks.

I went out to explore San Salvador's dubious nighttime attractions: The streets were deserted, dark and spooky.

Tiny El Salvador is not a happy place. It is seriously overpopulated and riven by a seemingly intractable civil war in which over 70,000 have already died. On one side is an elected, rightist government that more or less represents the middle and upper classes and the military. On the other is a ferocious collection of Stalinist Marxists, armed and financed by Nicaragua, Cuba and the USSR.

TV footage from El Salvador showed FMLN rebels with Soviet Army sniper rifles and other East Bloc weapons that could only come from Nicaragua and Cuba.

In the middle are El Salvador's long-suffering people, who just want the war to end.

This mini-Tet offensive, like the famous one in Vietnam, was clearly aimed at provoking a popular rising and overthrowing the elected government. Claims by the FMLN and its mouthpieces in

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the Canadian "peace" movement that the offensive was in response to a bombing last week of a left-wing union hall are lies. Such a broad-scale operation takes months of careful planning and stockpiling of munitions and supplies.

It's also clear that the assault was planned while peace talks were going on between the two sides in Mexico. Gorbachevian sweetness and light does not extend to Central America. The offensive was also, I suspect, a loud statement by Stalinist Cuba and Nicaragua that they will have no part of Mikhail Gorbachev's current trend toward peaceful accommodation with the capitalist world. *La revolucion* must go on!

Cuba and Nicaragua are now isolated and under siege. Recent events in East Germany, until lately a staunch supporter of Castro and his self-styled "little brother," Nicaraguan leader Danny Ortega, must have badly shaken the Western Hemisphere's Stalinists.

This week Castro mused aloud about the "tragic events" in East Germany. How better to lift Marxist spirits than a dramatic victory in El Salvador?

But the people of El Salvador did not rise up for the communists. The army seems to be slowly gaining the upper hand. More fighting and assassinations will surely follow.

Until now, both sides in the war generally followed an unwritten rule not to attack families. The FMLN has broken this understanding by attacking the homes of government leaders.

Expect the right-wing death squads and left-wing hit teams to redouble their murderous efforts.

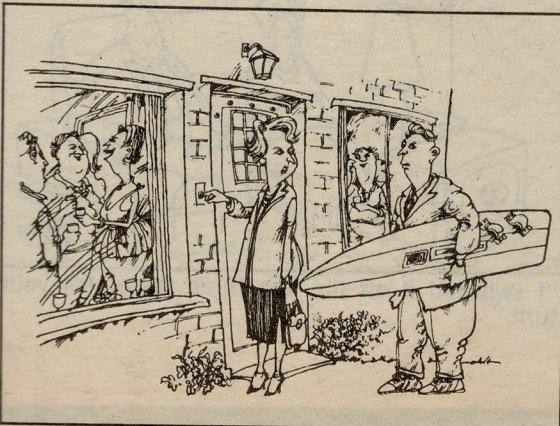
There's also more bad news for war-torn Central America. Recent attempts to end neighboring Nicaragua's civil war and hold elections there could be jeopardized by the latest FMLN offensive. The agreement signed earlier this year by Central American leaders called for an end to the fighting in both Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The anti-communist Contras in Nicaragua were to be disbanded — and the FMLN in El Salvador was to negotiate peace with the government. Most of the Contras have been confined to their camps in Honduras. But the FMLN laughed at the agreement, as we saw this week. Now the problem of El Salvador, which was glossed over in the peace agreements, must be faced — and dealt with. Unless it is, the entire painfully constructed peace and election process in Nicaragua may unravel.

Canada, which has just joined the Organization of American States, has, so far, played a rather smarmy role in all this by giving quiet support to the Marxists in Nicaragua and Cuba while cold-shouldering El Salvador's government which, while not pure, was still pretty freely elected.

Ottawa might show some guts and responsibility for a change by publicly telling its friend Castro to stop making trouble in Central America.

Punch



"And don't bore everyone to death about wind-surfing."