



LATIN AMERICA

## Old times' sake

EL SALVADOR HAS BECOME THE LATEST country to be targeted by the Pentagon to host a United States Army "humanitarian aid" mission. The biggest ever US-Salvadoran joint military exercise, "Operation Strong Roads", will be held until next August, and is intended to craft a benign image for a military generally associated with bombing schools, not building them.

The exercise comes at a time when the role of the Salvadoran armed forces is subject to intense debate. The 1992 Chapultepec Accords, which ended the 12-year civil war, ordered an end to the army's role as internal security force and declared that it be used only to repel external attack. Also demanded was a sharp reduction in troop numbers and the removal of officers implicated in human rights abuses.

The military and its rightwing patrons, however, have tried to strengthen the army's role by redefining its mission to include the war on drugs, combating crime and civic aid programmes.

"Strong Roads" is aimed at bolstering the image of civic service. According to Pentagon press statements, the first phase will deploy US troops with Salvadoran military units to dig wells and build schools.

The ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) government hopes that "Strong Roads", coupled with the army's renewed use as a security force, will enable the military to reassert itself as a pre-eminent force in Salvadoran society.

Arena also wants to see the armed forces' battered public image repaired. The army has been on the defensive ever since the release of the United Nations Truth Commission report in March. The UN report concluded that the army bore responsibility for the vast majority of human rights abuses, ranging from the 1981 massacre of 400 peasants at El Mozote, to the 1989 mur-



■ **YANKEE DOODLE:** Thousands of Salvadoran troops have been trained by the US

der of six Jesuit priests.

The timing of "Strong Roads" also appears linked to Arena's bid for reelection. Nationwide elections are slated for March 1994, with every elected office — from municipal councils to the presidency — on the ballot. The army can help Arena cast itself in the role of social benefactor.

The exercises also allow the Pentagon to maintain an active presence in Central America, with US military leaders still cultivating strong ties with their Salvadoran counterparts.

Throughout the war, the Pentagon and its Salvadoran allies tried to win "hearts and minds" with civic action programmes that served as prototypes for "Strong Roads".

From "Operation San Vicente '83" to "United to Reconstruct" in 1986, these programmes failed to erase the military's murderous reputation. With "Strong Roads" they seem bent on giving it another try — demonstrating that for the military there indeed is life after the Cold War. ■

— Mike Zielinski, *Covert Action Information Bulletin*