

# Major command shake-up likely in Salvadoran army

By FRANK SMYTH  
Special to The Miami Herald

SAN SALVADOR — Young army officers are seeking changes in El Salvador's military high command and are likely to replace Chief of Staff Gen. Adolfo Blandon with one of their own, according to Western diplomats and Salvadoran officials.

The changes could come as early as July 1, the diplomats and officials said, when the army is scheduled to announce its biannual promotions. Such a shake-up will mark the biggest reorganization in the armed forces in five years.

The changes will also mark the ascent to power of the Salvadoran military academy's class of 1966, the so-called *tandona*, or "big class." Slated to take Blandon's job, the officials and diplomats say, is Col. Rene Emilio Ponce, 41, who gradu-

ated first in the *tandona* and is senior among 28 *tandona* officers still active.

The military reorganization was provoked in part by the illness of President Jose Napoleon Duarte, who left El Salvador to undergo treatment for stomach cancer in the United States May 31. Duarte is scheduled to come home sometime before July 10, and the diplomats and officials said the army may wait until he returns before announcing its promotions.

The Western diplomats and Salvadoran officials said the *tandona's* ascent will likely result in a tougher policy in El Salvador's eight-year war against leftist guerrillas. The sources denied, however, that the changes presaged a military coup, rumored here for several weeks.

Influential military officers in the

## The changes will mark the ascent to power of the Salvadoran military academy's class of 1966, the so-called *tandona*, or 'big class.'

past two months have held at least four emergency meetings to discuss the shake-up, one Western diplomat said. Although most of the officers agreed that changes were needed, they were divided on whether Ponce or a more senior officer should receive the top post. Should the army name Ponce, he would leapfrog about half a dozen generals and colonels in the army's seniority list.

Ponce's promotion could "create a backlash," said a European diplomat. But "there is no love lost," he added, between the *tandona* officers and their seniors. Although Blandon would be forced to retire, the sources said, Defense Minister Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova would be allowed to stay on, probably through general elections scheduled next March.

Both Blandon and Vides have been closely associated with the Duarte government and U.S. policy. But with the government in decline, the *tandona* has been positioning itself for the years ahead, say Western diplomats and Salvadoran military sources.

Members of the *tandona* already hold important High Command posts as chiefs of operations and intelligence, and also serve as brigade commanders in the army's most important field units. With Ponce, now Third brigade commander in San Miguel, as chief of staff, the *tandona's* takeover of the armed forces would be nearly complete.

U.S. officials acknowledged the *tandona's* strength and maintained that there was no friction between the Salvadoran officers and U.S. policy regarding the conduct of the war. In an unusually frank interview, however, Col. Juan Orlando Zepeda, chief of military intelligence and a top *tandona* member, admitted there are tensions.

Zepeda charged the United States had made "no definition of objec-

tives." U.S. Ambassador Edwin Corr has long argued that building democracy is the first priority of U.S. policy in El Salvador, but Zepeda said, "first we must win the war, then strengthen the democracy."

Zepeda also complained of friction with the CIA.

"We don't understand them, says Zepeda, "and they don't understand us." Zepeda, like Ponce and most of the other *tandona* members, espouses a tough political line, holding that the armed forces are El Salvador's most important institution.

One Western official acknowledged that the *tandona* discussed a coup in recent weeks, but said it was unlikely — at least for now — that internal command changes will extend beyond the institution of the armed forces.