

Salvador probe may lead to top

✓ *Concern is growing that Reagan's El Salvador policy may take the U.S. on the same road that led to Vietnam. Page 8C.*

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SAN SALVADOR — It started out like just another kidnap case in a country where kidnappings and murders are routine affairs. But the beleaguered government of El Salvador is using the recent arrest of Guillermo Antonio Roeder Escobar as additional proof to its U.S. supporters that it is cracking down on human rights abuses.

Roeder, as it turns out, is no ordinary Salvadoran thug, but a well-connected former major in the National Guard and the first high-ranking former officer to be arrested for any major crime. As such, he could provide a handy example of the "renegade ex-military men" on whom the government has tried to pin most of the violence carried out against civilians here.

More than just a "renegade," Roeder in recent years has operated his own private army, according to police. Police said Roeder had at least 100 and possibly as many as 400 armed men under his personal control. He rented his "troops" as security guards to protect the same kind of rich, fearful Salvadorans whom police now allege he kidnapped. His conviction thus would delight the wealthy families who were his victims, and who continue to wield enormous power here, especially with the newspapers that detest the current government.

Roeder's conviction also would not overly offend the army, which expelled him two years ago for his alleged role in a multimillion-dollar fraud. And unlike the case of the murdered American churchwomen, which required U.S. aid and considerable prodding to investigate, the Roeder case has been entirely a local initiative.

But there is one very delicate problem: Roeder's case may lead more places than the government cares to go.

Roeder and five others were arrested for kidnapping and extortion Jan. 28 as the result of an anonymous tip, according to Capt. Ricardo Trigueros, chief of investigations of the National Police. Under the Salvadoran criminal-justice system, the six have been jailed pending formal charges.

The police statement said Roeder was arrested at his apartment while awaiting delivery of \$700,000 in ransom for Guillermo Bustamante Augspurg, a businessman whom members of the gang had held hostage for 49 days.

Police called Roeder "the intellectual director of a kind of mafia dedicated to acts of blackmail, extortion and other crimes." One of two women arrested with him allegedly had performed the actual kidnapping, dragging Bustamante into a stolen red van as he left a barber shop around noon Dec. 9. The kidnapers told the family it would cost \$4 million to save Bustamante's ears.

Roeder befriended the family and urged them to pay the ransom to protect his dear friend, Bustamante, according to the police account. When police broke into his office, they said, they found an arsenal of weapons, disguises, tape-recording equipment and ammunition. Police said the cache was enough to lead them to conclude that Roeder had operated either one of the local rightist death squads that plague this city or "one of the clandestine subversive organizations" of the leftist guerrillas.

Police said Roeder's group collected at least \$800,000 and probably more from the family of Roberto Siman, another businessman kidnapped and released in 1980. The city is now awash in reports that the probe has tied Roeder to half a dozen other lucrative kidnappings.

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In an interview, El Salvador's defense minister, Lermo Garcia, widely considered the power behind the throne here, would not discuss the probe but promised to pursue the Roeder case wherever it leads. "I will maintain our neutrality, that all are equal and that we will act against anyone, whatever his connection," Garcia said, holding his hands behind his back. That could prove to be a wide net indeed. Letters written from jail, quoted in the newspapers, find him complacent and relaxed, confident that his money, and his lawyers will gain his quick release.

Observers are also quick to add that one of the candidates for president March 28 is another former National Guard major, Roberto D'Aubuisson, an extreme-right-wing link has been established between the candidate and a National Guard colleague.

At the moment, the case remains a pleasing one to the power, the Christian Democrats, who want to appear strong in the military.

"The case gives the army a new and more honest face," said Adolfo Rey Prendes, the party's leading candidate in the legislature. "For the first time an officer has been held accountable. Perhaps people will start thinking things really have changed."