

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **EL SALVADOR**

### **FMLN's Schafick Handal Dies**

The leader of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), Jorge Schafick Handal, died of a heart attack at Comalapa Airport on 24 Jan upon his return from Bolivia where he attended the presidential inauguration of Evo Morales. Handal was 75-years-old. Three days of nationwide mourning followed his passing, and uncertainty in both the left and the right political camps persists regarding how his absence will reshape the nature of Salvadoran politics.

Handal entered politics in '57 as the Secretary General of the San Salvador Communist Party (PCS)—a position he held for 27 years. During that time he also served as commander-in-chief of the Armed Liberation Force (FAL) during El Salvador's 12-year civil war. In '92, Handal represented FAL interests in the peace agreements that concluded the war. That same year he helped form the FMLN. In '97 Handal was elected to the National Assembly as an FMLN legislator. He retained his seat after a failed attempt at the presidency in '04, losing to the current president, Elías Antonio Saca of the National Republican Alliance (ARENA).

FMLN legislator Salvador Sánchez Cerén will temporarily assume Handal's responsibilities until after the 12 Mar municipal elections when, according to party members, a new party head will officially be named. Many politicians in and outside the party have voiced their belief that Cerén seems the most plausible successor. Of the five generals who led the oppositional force in the war and subsequently founded the FMLN, he is the only survivor and was well-known to be Handal's closest friend and political ally.

"It is natural that the people are searching for a substitute for Schafik," said Cerén in response to questions about his possible ascension as FMLN leader. "But it is impossible to find someone like him."

Some experts are unsure that the FMLN will be able to survive the loss of its historic leader. In June, 350 members left the party to form the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), substantially weakening the FMLN base. The dean of the José Matías Delgado University, David Escobar Galindo, who also participated in the '92 peace agreements on behalf of the government, said that he foresees the left

restructuring itself outside of the FMLN. “Schafik took control of a boat that had no captains. I don’t see anyone else capable [of replacing him] within the FMLN.”

Handal’s death also represents a major political loss for ARENA. “[The right] has to find a new bogeyman,” said Galindo. “They had assigned to Handal a monopoly on wrongness.”

Just days before the death of Handal, President Saca had criticized FMLN’s leader of deliberately trying to “fight to destabilize the work of the elected president.” ARENA politicians have since joined in the mourning period, and Saca has described Handal as “a great fighter for social causes.”

The general coordinator of the FMLN, Medardo González, said that the future of his party would be clearer after the elections, and that, regardless of the outcomes, the FMLN will maintain its political trajectory. He also assured reporters that even with the loss of their historic leader the FMLN would survive. “Look at ARENA, look at the Christian Democratic Party. They don’t have leaders, but they function.”

### **Seven Dead in Gang-Related Soccer Match Massacre**

The San Agustín soccer team was warming up for a match against their rival, Milán, on 23 Jan, when, according to witnesses, 13 men—intricately tattooed and armed with handguns—entered the field from the northern entrance. It was 4:30 in the afternoon—broad daylight—and fans garbed in team colors were filing into the stadium. The intruders ordered the players to stand up and take off their shirts. As the players complied, the perpetrators raised their guns and shot, point-blank, anyone without a tattoo; that is, anyone without an outward signifier of gang affiliation.

The attack in Penitente Abajo, Zacatecoluca, left five players, an innocent bystander and an unidentified gang member dead on the field.

Police found an abandoned car outside the stadium and, by tracing the plates, located and arrested ten M-18 gang members for their suspected involvement in the murders. Twenty witnesses have identified the detained suspects as the perpetrators.

Meanwhile, among mourning and public outcry, citizens and police have tried to assign a motive. Government officials have attributed the crime to the victims’ refusal to get involved in gang activity. “[The victims] only sin was not wanting to join the gang. The M-18 members were furious that [the players] were productively enjoying themselves having refused to join gangs,” said Interior Minister René Figueroa.

Some Penitente Abajo residents, however, have said that the murders might have been punishment for a 3-0 loss the San Agustín team suffered a few months back. According to residents, gang members stood outside the stadium after the defeat, threw bottles and threatened the players with “a little present” upon their return. Some residents speculated that perhaps the 23 Jan massacre was that forewarned gift.

The government has provided special protection for the 20 witnesses. The chief of police in Zacatecoluca has vowed to assign special agents to ensure the witness’ safety. Interior Minister Figueroa urged the justice system to try the suspects to the fullest extent of the law.

## **More Police Spending More Time in Most Violent Areas**

On 30 Jan, the National Civil Police (PNC) began redistributing 12,000 officers, along with a 2,000-member re-enforcement body made up of military and police academy cadets, to the 21 most violent municipalities in the country. President Antonio Saca said the move intends to reduce assassinations and extortion by the nation's large gang population.

Each municipality's murder rate determined its necessity for increased law enforcement presence. For example, Armenia, Sonsonate, having had the highest murder rate last year of 159 homicides per 100,000 residents, received the largest police officer increase. Within a national population of 6.7 million, 2,761 homicides were committed last year—1,000 more than in '04.

In addition to the increased police officer presence in high risk urban areas, a 300-member force will be summoned to rural areas to patrol buses (Vol. 25, No. 1). "These 300 officers are going to be boarding buses selectively and randomly to maintain order and, most importantly, to combat extortions," said Interior Minister Figueroa.

The fortification of police forces was paralleled by promises in the Justice Department to strengthen its resources and personnel. Attorney General Romeo Barahono said that he will be recruiting and placing four or five additional prosecutors in the district attorney offices within the 21 targeted municipalities. The beefed up offices will be more apt to aid in major investigation, and, if the re-deployment works, process the expected increase in criminal cases.

The reorganization of PNC officer placement is the first major move made by the new PNC director, Rodrigo Ávila. When publicly announcing the new officer deployment, Ávila said that in coming weeks the PNC also will focus on capturing the 86 most-wanted murder suspects currently at large and modernizing and purifying the recently created Division of Judicial Order Performance.

—*Rob Fischer*