

## ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT

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CENTRAL AMERICA JENNINGS: Well, a lot of people have been asking questions, not just about the administration's policies in the region, but more directly. Just who is it that this country is backing, or in some cases, trying to hurt? We asked ABC's Rick Inderfurth to answer some of the questions.

INDERFURTH: In El Salvador, the military situation has improved for government forces in recent weeks. They outnumber the leftist guerrillas by more than three-to-one. And with the recent adoption of more aggressive small-unit tactics long urged by American advisers, the Salvadoran army has gone on the offensive, retaking significant amounts of territory lost to the rebels. And U.S. officials confirm that the flow of arms to the rebels to Nicaragua is down, in part because the Salvadoran and Honduran navies have gotten better at policing the Gulf of Fonseca, where gunrunners once operated with little interference. In Nicaragua, the military situation is also stable, but it's a leftist Sandinista government that's in control. U.S. officials say the 7,000 to 10,000 CIA-backed counter-revolutionaries, many operating from bases inside neighboring Honduras, have had some success in harassing the Nicaraguan regime--blowing up bridges and destroying crops. But American officials admit the insurgents have little chance at the moment of overthrowing the Sandinistas, a regime backed up by the largest army in the region, over 25,000 men, with another 50,000 reserves. All this suggests the fighting in Central America is not about to slide into a broader regional war. A few weeks ago, however, there were U.S. intelligence reports, some now discounted, saying the Soviets and Cubans were about to expand their military support to the Nicaraguans. In response, President Reagan raised the military ante in the region well beyond normal training levels: two aircraft carrier battle groups and the battleship New Jersey. All told, 19 warships, 140 combat aircraft, and over 16,000 officers and men are being dispatched to the waters off Nicaragua. Another 5,000 U.S. military personnel, most of them combat troops, will take part in joint ground exercises in Honduras. Despite this muscle-flexing, Pentagon officials say the likelihood or need for U.S. forces to get involved in actual fighting in Central America is very low. However, there are circumstances where that could change. The most dangerous case: if Soviet-built big aircraft or Cuban fighting units are sent to Nicaragua. The U.S. has warned Havana and Moscow that either move would require, as one Pentagon official put it, appropriate action by the U.S. Some officials have even suggested the possibility of an airstrike to take out those MiG fighters if they reach the Sandinistas. Two other potential flashpoints: If the Cubans or Nicaraguans dramatically increase their military assistance to

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the rebels fighting in El Salvador, it could provoke a U.S. naval quarantine of Nicaragua, something those carrier battle groups will be practicing in the days ahead. And, what if the Nicaraguans attack Honduras, attempting to knock out the anti-Sandinista bases located there? Such an attack is presently thought unlikely, given the superiority of the Honduran air force and the apparent reluctance of the Sandinistas, for political as well as military reasons, to go to outright war against one of their neighbors. American forces training in Honduras could conceivably be caught up in such a conflict, but U.S. officials say the very presence of American combat troops in Honduras will serve as a deterrent. So, for now at least, U.S. officials do not expect the Soviets or the Cubans or the Nicaraguans to step across any of those lines. But just in case, American military forces are being sent to the region to know better how to respond to those threats if they occur. Rick Inderfurth, ABC News, the Pentagon.