

CBS EVENING NEWS

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CENTRAL AMERICA
/U.S. AID

RATHER: After six days of very heavy White House lobbying, the Senate Appropriations Committee today approved two record aid proposals for Central America. It gave the go-ahead for \$93 million in emergency military aid for El Salvador, aid the administration says is needed to keep that country's army from collapsing. On covert aid to Nicaragua's contras, rebels fighting the Sandinista regime, the committee reversed itself and approved an immediate \$7 million and a possible \$14 million more at a later date. As David Martin has learned, the administration request is needed to fund a growing guerrilla force.

MARTIN: Informed sources tell CBS News the number of CIA-supported guerrillas battling the Sandinista government of Nicaragua has grown to nearly 18,000, an increase of 8,000 since last summer. The CIA is spending \$3 million a month on this army of contras, which has now reached the size limit set by President Reagan two years ago. It is also nearly twice the size of the Nicaraguan-backed guerrilla forces fighting to overthrow the government of El Salvador. Yet intelligence analysts say its impact is substantially less. The contras have now begun mining Nicaraguan ports in an attempt to force Mexico to shut off vital oil shipments. They have also bombed a radio intercept station used by Cubans and Nicaraguans to eavesdrop on the Salvadoran army. Yet intelligence analysts say there is no evidence the operation is forcing the Sandinistas to back away from their support of the guerrillas in El Salvador or their own military buildup. Soviet bloc ships continue to bring in new military hardware for the Sandinista army, the latest delivery a shipload of tanks. But there is still no sign of the long-expected arrival of Soviet-build MiG aircraft. This video tape purchased by CBS News shows most of the Sandinista air force. Except for these helicopters outfitted with rocket pods, it is a delapidated force of Korean War vintage planes. But the Sandinistas are building a new airfield with runways that are the longest in Central America and taxiways where planes can disperse behind earthen shields. Intelligence analysts say that sooner or later the Sandinistas intend to base modern jet aircraft here. Some analysts believe the Sandinistas will accelerate their buildup during the American presidential campaign, betting that President Reagan will not risk greater involvement in a controversial war. But they say if he is re-elected there's likely to be another step up in America's not-so-secret war against Nicaragua. David Martin, CBS News, the Pentagon.