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REUTERS
14 July 1983WASHINGTON
COVERT
BY JIM ADAMS

Congressional leaders disagreed today on whether President Reagan is expanding his covert operation against Nicaragua, and one Democrat accused Reagan of "pursuing a policy of undeclared war with Nicaragua."

Deputy House Democratic Whip Bill Alexander told reporters that Nicaraguan insurgent leaders were flying to CIA headquarters in Washington to pick up paychecks for a force that has swelled to 10,000 fighters.

"Continued pursuit of that policy will lead to bloodshed," Alexander, an Arkansas Democrat, said. "The administration is pursuing a policy of undeclared war against Nicaragua. It is a policy of simple-minded deception."

But House Republican Leader Robert Michel of Illinois told reporters after a meeting with Reagan that the president was not expanding covert aid for anti-Sandinist rebels in Nicaragua.

Michel said a report in today's Washington Post that the CIA was planning to support a force of 12,000 to 15,000 rebels "does not square with the facts."

"Those are not the correct figures," Michel said. "When you talk in terms of about half of that, that's more in the ballpark."

Reagan has acknowledged that the United States is supporting what he calls "freedom fighters" opposing the leftist Sandinist government and there were press reports in May that they totaled 7,000.

The State Department said last week the total number of insurgents had risen to 8,000 to 10,000.

However, the administration has said U.S. aid is going only to part of that group -- rebels operating out of Honduras.

The other insurgents include Miskito Indians and a rebel group in southern Nicaragua led by former Sandinist official Eden Pastora.

Reagan has denied that the United States is supporting the overthrow of the Sandinist government, saying the U.S. aid goes only to operations to interdict arms supplies through Nicaragua to rebels in El Salvador and neighboring countries.

But the Washington Post said the new CIA plan would expand the purpose to include pressure on the Sandinist government to restore democratic institutions.

Two members of the House Intelligence Committee, which is told in classified briefings how many rebels the United States is supporting, refused to comment on the Post report but said the size of the force was expanding.

The House is to hold a secret session on the operation next week and vote the following week on a bill that would cut off funds for the operation.

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