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U.S. Said to Plan a Military Base In Honduras to Train Salvadorans

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WASHINGTON, April 9 — The United States is planning to set up a military base in Honduras for the training of Salvadoran soldiers, according to two Reagan Administration officials.

One of the officials said the base would be staffed with about 100 United States military advisers and that the Defense Department expected to have it operating in six weeks to two months.

The second official, in a separate interview, said the matter was "highly sensitive" and was being "played very close to the vest." He added that an agreement in principle had been reached by the two countries and that only the details remained to be worked out.

Negotiations Acknowledged

A senior Defense Department official acknowledged that the United States was very interested in having a training installation in Honduras and that it was discussing the possibility with the Hondurans, but he said a final agreement had not yet been reached. Publicity about the possibility of a base in Honduras, he added, might jeopardize the negotiations.

The Reagan Administration has an agreement with Congress not to place more than 55 United States military advisers in El Salvador, an agreement that apparently would not be directly violated by sending the advisers to Honduras to conduct training there. There is no limit on the number of United States military advisers in Honduras.

A foreign diplomat in Honduras said today that "internally, politically," the issue was so volatile that Honduran Government officials had been publicly denying all reports of negotiations about the training camp.

Hondurans Badly Defeated

One of the conditions still being negotiated, according to another diplomat, is how many Hondurans would also be trained at the base. The Hondurans were said to be demanding such training because they do not want their army to become inferior to that of the Salvadorans.

There is still considerable animosity in Honduras toward Salvadorans because of a war the two countries fought in 1969.

During that brief but bloody conflict, the Honduran Army was badly defeated, with Salvadoran troops closing in on Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, before a truce was arranged. Today many Honduran Army officers still show greater distrust of the Salvadoran Army than of the Sandinists in Nicaragua.

The Administration official who provided the information about the training base in Honduras said the Defense Department's primary concern now was the reaction of Congress and the United States public.

The two Government officials and a third who is familiar with the plan noted that training the Salvadorans in Honduras would avoid the appearance of greater United States involvement in El Salvador.

Besides avoiding the problem of the ceiling on advisers who can be sent to El Salvador, another advantage of training the soldiers in Honduras is that it would be considerably cheaper than bringing them to the United States, according to several Government officials familiar with the plan. It cost approximately \$18 million to train some 1,400 Salvadoran soldiers and officer cadets at Fort Benning, Ga., and Fort Bragg, N.C., last year.

The need for further training of Salvadoran soldiers is regarded as pressing because the war is not going particularly well for the Salvadoran Army.

In spite of the helicopters and jet aircraft, other equipment and training that the Salvadorans have received from the United States, the guerrilla forces fighting the Government appear to be stronger than they were before the aid began to arrive two years ago. In recent months, they have attacked and held for brief periods such major cities as Suchitoto and Berlin.

U.S. Commander 'Pessimistic'

Lieut. Gen. Wallace Nutting, head of the United States Southern Command in Panama, recently told a Congressional delegation that he was "very pessimistic" about the military situation in El Salvador.

One cause for alarm among Salvadoran and United States military officials is that nearly all the soldiers who make up the Atlacatl and Ramón Beloso battalions are scheduled to be discharged in the next six months. The Atlacatl Battalion was trained in El Salvador by United States advisers, the Ramón Beloso Battalion at Fort Bragg.

Those two battalions have been by far the most effective in combat and have been rushed from one crisis spot to the next, with very little time for the soldiers to recover mentally or physically between battles. But the troops have gained considerable combat experience.

To man the two battalions with raw recruits would be a severe blow to the overall effectiveness of the Salvadoran Army, according to Salvadoran and United States military officials.

On the other hand, they recognized that to extend the enlistments of the current members of the two units beyond two years could lead to serious morale problems.