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President Admits Aiding Guerrillas Against Nicaragua

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President Reagan yesterday acknowledged U.S. support of anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua but said his administration was "complying fully" with a congressional prohibition on activities aimed at overthrowing Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime.

"Anything we're doing in that area is simply trying to interdict the supply lines which are supplying the [leftist] guerrillas in El Salvador," the president said at a brief news conference. "But the picture today is that Nicaragua, with its protests that somehow someone is trying to overthrow them, is, as a revolutionary government, trying to overthrow the government of . . . El Salvador . . ."

A high administration official said later that "part of the interdiction" was the use of sophisticated Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft to spy on air traffic in and out of Nicaragua. The planes, based at Tinker Air Force Base, Okla., are refueled in midair over Mexico and are blanketing Nicaragua with radar surveillance from the safety of international waters in the Pacific, officials said.

While Reagan publicly insisted in the White House briefing room that his administration is obeying the law in Central America, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and national security adviser William P. Clark were making the same argument in the Capitol to Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Boland is the author of an amendment bearing his name that prohibits U.S. assistance "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking military conflict between Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras.

The 35-minute meeting was described by administration officials as "a good, friendly consultation on our policy in El Salvador and Nicaragua" in which Boland did not assert that the Reagan government is violating the law. They described Boland as "cordial and non-committal, as we expected."

But a congressional source said Boland "expressed a very serious amount of concern" among committee members about whether the administration was complying with the law. "I don't think it was a meeting to change anyone's position," the source said.

Each side listened carefully to the opposing concerns and agreed at the end of the meeting that Shultz would return Wednesday to testify before the full committee in closed session. Clark does not plan to testify, in keeping with what the White House described as a long tradition.

Reagan made his comments on Central America at a news conference called to celebrate the Senate confirmation of Kenneth L. Adelman as director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. But reporters ignored that announcement and all their questions except one were about administration policy in Central America.

The president, after first saying he couldn't say anything except that the administration was "complying with the law," launched a vigorous defense of his policy and an attack on the "completely Marxist" government of Nicaragua.

"We are not doing anything to try and overthrow the Nicaraguan government," Reagan said. ". . . Nicaragua today has created the biggest military force in all of Central America and large parts of South America—an army of some 25,000 backed by a militia of 50,000, armed with Soviet weapons that consist of heavy-duty tanks, an air force, helicopter gun ships, fighter planes, bombers and so forth . . ."

Reagan said this Nicaraguan armed force was opposed by a few thousand Miskito Indians and guerrillas and added, "I don't think it's reasonable to assume that that kind of a force could nurse any ambitions that they can overthrow that government with that great military force."

In previous intelligence and State Department reports, the administration has never asserted that the Nicaraguans possess an air force of any significance. The air force is mainly a few old trainers and civilian propeller planes, although Nicaragua has received modern artillery and heavy tanks from Cuba and the Soviet Union, according to these reports.

Reagan attempted to turn around criticism that the United States is supporting efforts to overthrow the leftist Nicaraguan government by insisting Nicaragua is trying to overthrow the elected government of El Salvador by supplying arms to leftist insurgents. The president hinted that he would take action to prevent this if permitted, but said "what I might personally wish or what our government might wish still would not justify us violating the law of the land."

White House counselor Edwin Meese III also reflected administration unhappiness with the Boland amendment at a breakfast meeting with reporters. He said, "It is the responsibility of the president to conduct foreign policy; limitations on that by the Congress are improper as far as I'm concerned."