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Aid to El Salvador vital, Gerald Ford tells VOA listeners

By Ed Rogers
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U.S. aid is vital to the survival of El Salvador's democratic government, former President Gerald Ford said yesterday.

Mr. Ford made his remarks on a new Voice of America "call-in" program.

The one-time Republican leader of the House said he regrets opposition to the aid by House Democrats and defended the use of covert action by the United States as "a very legitimate activity of our government" if it is well run and clearly needed.

During the 50-minute worldwide radio premiere of "Talk to America," Mr. Ford also spoke of unrest in Soviet-dominated East Europe and discounted the threat of a nuclear war in replies to questions asked by people in 11 nations around the globe.

Host Larry King in Washington, D.C., joined by Mr. Ford in Palm Springs, Calif., fielded calls from Australia, El Salvador, England, France, Greece, India, Israel, Malaysia, New Zealand, South Africa and West Germany. The participants called in their telephone numbers and the VOA called them back to save them the cost of a long-distance call. To save time, Mr. King asked them not to bother to give their names.

"I applaud the recent election . . . that resulted in President [Jose Napoleon] Duarte being the winner," Mr. Ford said in answer to a question from a man in El Salvador, adding that the White House and Congress should join to help the new regime to succeed.

"Why do the Democrats of Congress oppose it [U.S. aid] if we know that is the only way to avoid a communist takeover here?" the caller asked.

"I regret very much that there are some in the Congress . . . most of them as I recall are in the House of Representatives on the Democratic side . . . opposed to the kind of economic aid, and to some extent some military assistance, to the Duarte government," Mr. Ford replied.

"If the Duarte government fails, there's no question that the Sandinista elements in that part of the world, with their base in Nicaragua, will continue to spread the wrong philosophy in Central America," Mr. Ford said.

Mr. King then asked if Mr. Ford believed covert activity there must be continued.

"I've seen the benefit of covert operations in many many cases while I was in the Congress and while I was in the White House," Mr. Ford said, "and if they can be well run and if there's a clear need for them . . . then I would support them."

To a caller in Clermont, France, who felt that Europe — not the United States or the Soviet Union — would be the target of any limited nuclear war, Mr. Ford said, "I am absolutely certain that there will not be a nuclear confrontation. . . ."

Mr. Ford welcomed South Africa's adoption of a new constitution as a small step away from a previous "hard-line apartheid," or racial segregation, he told a caller from Johannesburg. "We should applaud it and not condemn it."

A caller from New South Wales, Australia, wanted to know if Jewish economic and political influence in the United States is not disproportionate to the size of the American Jewish population, which the caller estimated at 3 percent of the total.

Mr. Ford responded with a brief lecture on the constitutional right of citizens to petition the United States government, even in the form of organized lobbying.

To a woman in Selangor, Malaysia, Mr. Ford said the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro on the Democratic ticket means the "barrier has now been broken" for women and that Jesse Jackson's Democratic primary race means the barrier "may have been broken" for blacks.

Mr. Ford declined to advise the British government on how to deal with the mine worker strike for the benefit of a caller in Staffordshire. And he lectured on the virtues of the two-party political system despite difficulties it causes third-party candidates in response to a call from a man in Durban, South Africa.

Mr. Ford expressed hope to a woman in Auckland, New Zealand, that concerns over U.S. nuclear-powered ships voiced by that country's new prime minister will not destroy the benefits of a long-standing treaty between the two countries.

A man in Thessaloniki, Greece, raised the issue of Turkish troops that have occupied a third of predominantly-Greek Cyprus for more than 10 years.

"I'm not going to argue whether the Greek government or the Turkish government was right," the former president said.

"It's just very bad to see a great country like Cyprus torn apart by the current situation on that beautiful island."

What was Mr. Ford's most difficult crisis while president? He told a man in Madras, India, that it was the decision to use military force to recapture the U.S. merchant ship Mayaguez after the Cambodian government captured it in international waters.

U.S. residents could not call in — or even listen to the program — because Congress forbids domestic dissemination of any VOA broadcast.