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ON PAGE A-11

NEW YORK TIMES
30 MARCH 1983

SANDINIST FACTIONS FIGHT, REAGAN SAYS

He Declines Comment on U.S. Aid and Says the Conflict Is Between Ins and Outs

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 29 — President Reagan today described the recent fighting between the military and anti-Government forces in Nicaragua as a factional conflict between different elements of the coalition that seized power in Nicaragua in 1979.

In a question and answer session with six White House reporters, Mr. Reagan said the coalition that toppled the Government of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle collapsed when "the extreme left-faction" took control and created a "Marxist-Leninist government openly acknowledging their ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union."

"What we're seeing now," he said, "are the other revolutionary factions totally ousted from any participation in the Government now fighting back on that."

'Tried to Get Along'

Mr. Reagan declined to comment on whether the United States was covertly supporting the anti-Government paramilitary forces. He said his Administration had "tried to get along with the Government of Nicaragua" but had found it "in direct violation" of pledges that it would not support guerrillas in El Salvador.

The Sandinist Government in Managua has contended in recent days that paramilitary forces supported by the United States have stepped up their activities within the country, attacking civilians and Government troops in assaults in northwestern Nicaragua.

The Reagan Administration, while not denying it has aided anti-Government forces, has portrayed the fighting as an internal affair. That has been greeted with skepticism at the United Nations, where the Security Council has debated the Nicaraguan conflict this week. Allies like the Netherlands, Spain and Pakistan have questioned the American assessment of events.

"Today Mr. Reagan said he did not think that American credibility was being damaged. He said the United States had told its allies that "they've been subjected to quite a wave of worldwide propoganda based on the Salvadoran conflict."

"And I think we have convinced a number of them that what we're doing is valid," the President said.

Questions Raised in Congress

The escalation of hostilities in Nicaragua has also raised questions in Congress. There the key issue is whether the Administration is honoring a law that prohibits American support for any military effort to overthrow the Sandinist Government.

The law, which was passed by lopsided votes in both the Senate and House in December, was in the form of an amendment to a catchall appropriations bill for the fiscal year 1983. It was introduced after a flurry of published reports that the Central Intelligence Agency was providing arms and financial assistance to anti-Sandinist groups based in Honduras and Costa Rica.

The amendment, named for its sponsor, Representative Edward P. Boland, Democrat of Massachusetts, chairman of the House intelligence committee, bars support to paramilitary forces that is "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Nicaraguan Government.

Members of both the Senate and House intelligence committees said this week that concern was growing about the Central Intelligence Agency's role in the Nicaraguan conflict.

Representative Wyche Fowler Jr., Democrat of Georgia, a member of the House intelligence committee, is visiting Nicaragua and Honduras this week to look at the agency's activities. Other members said they expected the House committee to hold hearings on the issue next month.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, visited Central America earlier this year for the Senate intelligence committee. Members who have read a report that Mr. Leahy prepared about his visit said it had left little doubt that the agency, while following the letter of the Boland amendment, was violating its spirit.

Senior intelligence officials have said that the agency has provided weapons, ammunition and financial aid to paramilitary forces in Central America. This effort, which they said was approved by President Reagan in November 1981 as part of an extensive plan for intelligence operations in Central America, called for using the paramilitary units to stop the flow of Soviet and Cuban arms that the Administration said was moving across Honduras and Nicaragua to guerrillas in El Salvador.

According to senior national security officials, the irregular forces, made up primarily of Nicaraguan exiles including some former supporters of General Somoza, were also to be used to harass the Sandinist Government by conducting hit-and-run raids in Nicaragua from bases in Honduras and Costa Rica.

Psychological Warfare

Reagan Administration officials said Monday that the State Department's refusal to disclaim American support for anti-Sandinist forces was meant in part to be a form of psychological warfare. They said it was designed to keep Nicaraguan leaders worried about the extent of American involvement in hopes that this would force them to cease supporting guerrillas in El Salvador.

Central Intelligence Agency officials have told Congress that all these uses of the paramilitary forces fall within the terms of the Boland amendment because the United States assistance is not specifically for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan Government.

The problem, according to both Democrats and Republicans on the Senate and House intelligence committees, is that the C.I.A. cannot control the actions of the paramilitary forces.