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By ROBERT BLOCK
SAN SALVADOR

The Reagan administration is considering giving the El Salvador air force a gunship nicknamed "Puff the Magic Dragon" in the Vietnam war because it can fire 18,000 rounds a minute, U.S. officials said.

They said Washington is thinking about supplying three of the AC-47 twin-prop gunships to the Salvadoran Air Force.

"There is no firm decision on the AC-47 but it is certainly a piece of equipment under consideration," U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering said in a recent interview.

With three rapid-fire guns each capable of shooting 6,000 rounds a minute, the AC-47 is a slow-moving, low-flying plane capable of putting a bullet in every square inch of an area the size of a football field.

Its massive firepower and smoking guns earned it the nickname "Puff the Magic Dragon" in Vietnam.

Increasingly over the past year, El Salvador's air force has used U.S.-supplied jets to bomb guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.

Human rights groups say the raids inflict more casualties on civilians near combat zones than on the guerrillas, who have learned to avoid the bombs.

The U.S. officials said they did not know when a decision on supplying the gunships would be made.

Almost five years of civil war in El Salvador have left an estimated 45,000 people dead and have devastated the country's economy.

Some U.S. government and military officials have urged using AC-47s instead of the bombers because their firepower can be more precisely controlled, inflicting more casualties on the rebels.

"One rapid way to relieve forces under pressure and defend isolated targets is to have early possibilities to bring additional firepower on the scene," Pickering said.

But some diplomats and Human rights officials said they fear improper use of AC-47s could lead to even greater casualties among civilians than those apparently caused by the bombings.

According to U.S. intelligence sources, Gen. Paul Gorman, senior U.S. military commander for Latin America, last year urged using U.S. pilots to fly a larger gunship, the AC-130 Specter, against guerrilla strongholds.

The Reagan administration discarded the plan, which would have involved the CIA, as too risky politically, the sources said.

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