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CIA chief asks continued funding of 'secret war' in Central America

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WASHINGTON — Central Intelligence Agency Director William Casey has asked Congress to continue funding into 1984 the controversial covert operation against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, according to congressional sources.

In a closed-door appearance Thursday, Casey reiterated assurances that the Reagan Administration will honor congressional guidelines and restrictions on the scope of the operations, the sources said.

They said Casey noted before the House Appropriations Committee's subcommittee on defense that the restrictions prohibit involvement in any attempt to overthrow the Managua regime or to provoke war between Nicaragua and Honduras.

Casey was reported to have assured the panel members that the U.S. role remains limited to advice and financial aid for anti-Sandinista forces mounting harassment raids into Nicaragua from Honduras.

The sources said Casey told the subcommittee that the U.S.-backed operation has three major goals:

- Retaliation for Nicaraguan help to guerrillas in El Salvador.
- Interdiction of Nicaraguan arms shipments to the guerrillas.
- Pressure on the Sandinista government to negotiate with its internal opposition, with its Central American neighbors Honduras and Costa Rica and with the United States on reducing regional tensions.

Casey went to Capitol Hill to review, explain and defend the administration's budgetary requests for the Nicaraguan operations and for other intelligence activities around the world.

Both the CIA and the subcommittee said that they could not comment on Casey's appearance.

The appearance constituted Casey's most recent effort to justify a less-than-secret war — an increasingly controversial operation which has touched off mounting dissension within the Congress.

The American role, which goes back to December 1981, is under fire from liberals who oppose it and moderates who distrust it.

On the other side, conservatives say that Congress is tying the administration's hands in Central America.

Liberals are drafting legislation designed to stop the operation.

"We are just waiting for the appropriate bill to come along to do it," said an aide to Rep. Tom Harkin (D., Iowa), author of last year's first legislative attempt to interrupt the covert action.

Harkin's effort failed, but the House approved an amendment offered by Rep. Edward Boland (D., Mass.), chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, with language specifically prohibiting U.S. support for the overthrow of the Sandinistas or for provoking a regional war.

The language was lifted from classified, explicit instructions that the Intelligence Committees gave the CIA when it went to Congress in 1981 with its original plan for the anti-Sandinista operations, the sources said.

"What I can say is that [the] Intelligence Committee is as concerned about the substance of the allegations concerning paramilitary activities in Nicaragua and Central America as anybody," Boland said last week.

"That concern led to the language in the classified annex [to the CIA's secret 1983 budget] ... that expresses the sense ... that no funds ... should be used to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, or to provoke a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras," Boland said.

He said the Reagan Administration did not like the restrictions, "but had to agree to them."

The exact amount of the CIA budget request for the Nicaragua operation during fiscal 1984, which begins Oct. 1, remains a secret. Congressional sources not conne

ed to the intelligence committees speculated that it might be slightly higher than the 1983 funding, which also remains classified.

The sources say they believe the administration wants additional money because the operation has been essentially unsuccessful in disrupting the flow of guerrilla weapons into El Salvador.

According to the sources, the administration claims that the anti-Sandinista commandos may have crippled overland supply lines, but not the air supply routes seen as responsible for stepped up guerrilla activity in El Salvador. Nicaragua denies giving any assistance to the Salvadoran leftists.

Liberal Democrats say that until now, congressional moderates have continued to support the administration's stance on Nicaragua because they believe that the Sandinistas appear headed toward a Cuban-styled dictatorship and are indeed helping the Salvadoran guerrillas.

Liberals now believe that the only way to persuade moderates of the necessity to stop the covert operations is to offer an alternative to the attacks on the Sandinistas.

One group of liberals is working on the possibility of persuading the Sandinistas and "progressive" Nicaraguan exiles to open negotiations toward a reconciliation.

Their efforts center on Eden Pastora, the famed Commander Zero who fought with the Sandinistas to topple President Anastasio Somoza's national guard in 1979.

Disillusioned with the revolution, Pastora left Nicaragua in 1981, setting up an exile movement in Costa Rica and refusing to join the former guardsmen who make up a sizable portion of the leadership among the counterrevolutionary forces in Honduras.

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