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SENATE PANEL ASKS CIA ABOUT SALVADOR ELECTION ROLE
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Senate Intelligence Committee officials, while expressing surprise at Sen. Jesse Helms' charge the CIA "bought" El Salvador's presidential election, said Wednesday the panel has asked the spy agency about the claim.

"We don't know the basis of his allegation," said one committee staff aide, who spoke on condition he not be identified. "We have made some inquiries to the CIA regarding his statement."

Another congressional source said the CIA has provided money to support the democratic process in El Salvador, but that the assistance has not favored one party over another. In 1982, CIA Director William Casey said the agency helped provide security assistance for the balloting that year.

In a Senate floor statement Tuesday, Helms, R-N.C., said a "covert plan" funneled U.S. money into the campaign of moderate Christian Democratic candidate Jose Napoleon Duarte, who Helms described as a "socialist."

"In other words, the State Department and the CIA bought the election for Duarte," said Helms, a conservative who in the past has defended rightist candidate Roberto d'Aubuisson, the other candidate in the Salvadoran presidential run-off election last weekend.

Based on unofficial returns, Duarte claimed victory on Sunday. However, d'Aubuisson claimed Wednesday that his party's tallies show him narrowly defeating Duarte. Official returns are still being tabulated.

At a news conference, d'Aubuisson cited Helms' statement in charging that the CIA and the State Department had helped Duarte in the election. D'Aubuisson added, however, that he had no "tangible" proof to support the claim.

D'Aubuisson, a cashiered army major who has been linked to rightist death squads in El Salvador, was described by Helms as a person "who openly espoused the principles of the Republican Party in the U.S." Helms added that no hard evidence has ever been provided to back up allegations of d'Aubuisson's alleged death squad connections.