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Reagan Urged to Admit Contra-Aid Role

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 9 — The chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence challenged the White House today to acknowledge what he said is its role in the flight of a cargo plane shot down over Nicaragua.

Senator Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, said, "I assume somebody in the United States Government knows something about this and the sooner they speak up the better."

Asked who he thought in the Government was involved in the mission, he said, "Ronald Reagan is sponsoring all of this private action — ask him or somebody who works for him."

Senator Durenberger and Senator Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat who is the vice chairman of the committee, were briefed on the incident today by William J. Casey, Director of Central Intelligence. Senator Durenberger said he remains satisfied that the C.I.A. had complied with legal restrictions against aiding the Nicaraguan rebels, known as the contras.

Investigation Is Planned

Senator Leahy said the Intelligence Committee intended to continue raising questions about the incident. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee has already said it plans an inquiry.

"I think that with all of the events of the last few weeks, the Administration is skating on the knife edge of credibility," said Senator Leahy.

Asked whether the Reagan Administration had a problem with its credibility, Senator Durenberger said, "Ask Bernie Kalb." He was referring to the resignation Wednesday of the State Department spokesman, Bernard Kalb, because of reports of an Administration policy of misleading American news organizations about Libya.

A spokesman for the C.I.A. reiterated denials of an agency role in the flight. He rejected statements at a news conference today in Managua, Nicaragua, by Eugene Hasenfus, the surviving crew member, that he had worked in El Salvador with two C.I.A. officers.

Limits on Aid to Contras

By law, the C.I.A.'s aid to the contras is limited to the gathering and sharing of intelligence. The agency is not permitted to assist in arms dealings, although the restrictions will be lifted soon when the \$100 million aid package approved by Congress becomes law.

After Congress cut off aid to the contras more than two years ago, it was disclosed that some members of the White House staff were privately advising the rebels. Oliver North, a staff member on the National Security Council, was identified by officials as coordinating the effort.

A business card for one of the Americans implicated last year in Administration support of the contras, a retired military officer named Robert Owens, was found in the pocket of one of the crewmen killed in Nicaragua. One Administration official acknowledged that Mr. Owens had been associated with private efforts to aid the contras, but said he had also worked with a State Department program to fly humanitarian aid to the rebels.

In his news conference, Mr. Hasenfus said he was involved in 10 supply missions to Nicaragua from military airfields in Aguacate, Honduras, and Ilopango, El Salvador. A Congressional aide said that both installations are heavily guarded. The aide said that the type of identity card found on the body of one of the crew members would only be issued by the local governments to an American with the permission of the embassy or a senior military attaché.

Senator Durenberger said he doubted the downing of the cargo plane would undermine Congressional support for providing direct American military aid.