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U.S. Aides Refuse Details on Salvador Crash

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 — United States Government officials refused to answer questions today about the circumstances surrounding the crash of a twin-engine aircraft in El Salvador in which four American employees of the Central Intelligence Agency died.

The questions included the matter of why civilian intelligence agents were operating in an area that is regularly patrolled by United States military intelligence forces.

Flight's Origin a Mystery

Nor would the Government officials disclose where the intelligence-gathering flight originated. Several reports of the accident said that the plane may have taken off from Palmerola Air Base in Honduras. That is where the United States 224th Military Intelligence Battalion has been operating.

The crash occurred Friday.

The Salvadoran rebel radio asserted today that the aircraft had been shot down, an assertion that the State Department flatly denied.

A spokesman for the department, Brian Carlson, said that the assertion, broadcast by Radio Venceremos, that the plane had been hit by rebel ground fire was untrue.

He also denied rebels' assertions that Salvadoran soldiers had been aboard the craft, and that it had been supporting bombing operations by the Government.

Representative Thomas J. Downey, Democrat of New York, who had been briefed on the plane crash by the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, said today that he had "reason to believe that the flight did not originate" from the Palmerola base in Honduras.

Administration officials have said only that the plane, carrying four C.I.A. employees, crashed into a mountain in northeastern El Salvador during a heavy storm, killing the four employees. The plane's mission, according to the State Department, was "to assist in locating and identifying shipments of arms and ammunition from Nicaragua to the guerrillas in El Salvador."

But according to information given to members of Congress, the plane crashed while in pursuit of another aircraft.

Near Rebel Stronghold

In a letter to Mr. Casey today, Mr. Downey noted that the crash site was near a rebel stronghold and asked that assurances be given to Congress that no sensitive intelligence material had fallen into the hands of the rebel forces in El Salvador.

Mr. Downey said by telephone that he believed the downed plane was carrying "sophisticated sensing devices," including "side-looking radar."

In his letter to Mr. Casey, he asked for assurances that no United States military or intelligence personnel would be engaged in combat during efforts to recover the bodies from the plane crash. He also asked for assurances that the craft had not been operating over Nicaraguan territory.

Mr. Downey's first question to Mr. Casey, however, was, "Why was the C.I.A. flying reconnaissance when the 224th Military Intelligence Battalion was stationed in Honduras?" One of the ambiguities surrounding the plane crash, he said in a telephone interview, was why intelligence was being gathered clandestinely when it was also being gathered openly.

Other legislators were satisfied with the Administration's explanations of the plane crash. Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona and chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, called it "an unfortunate accident that happens day after day all over the world."

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York and the outgoing ranking minority member of the intelligence committee, said the crash was "just damned bad luck." He added that in this episode, "the C.I.A. has played straight with us."

Since taking office, the Reagan Administration has established an extensive intelligence-gathering network in Central America to monitor guerrilla activities in El Salvador and to track Soviet and Cuban arms shipments and other activities throughout the region.

In El Salvador, the United States supplies limited military assistance, including 55 military advisors, the aerial surveillance battalion, military equipment and training for Salvadoran forces, to help the Salvadoran Government in its war against leftist guerrillas.

The primary C.I.A. function in El Salvador has been to collect intelligence

about guerrilla operations and transmit the findings to the Salvadoran Government.

Mr. Downey said that he was not questioning the right of the C.I.A. to gather information in El Salvador. But he said the disclosure on Friday that three United States military advisers, one armed with an automatic weapon, had flown into a battle area during a Government offensive against the rebels raised serious questions about possible violations of the War Powers Act. The act places limits on the President's ability to commit military forces without consulting Congress.

The New York Congressman wrote to Representative Dante B. Fascell, Democrat of Florida and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, asking him to learn the facts and determine if the Administration had violated the law.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Presidential candidate, Walter F. Mondale, again called on President Reagan to dismiss Mr. Casey as head of the C.I.A. Without referring specifically to the plane crash in El Salvador, Mr. Mondale said in a radio broadcast today: "With Americans losing their lives in Central America, where are we headed next?"