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Reagan says hand tied on Salvador

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President Reagan yesterday came close to acknowledging U.S. support for anti-Sandinista guerrillas operating in Nicaragua, but said: "Anything that we are doing is aimed at interdicting these supply lines (of weapons to Marxist guerrillas in neighboring El Salvador) and stopping this effort to overthrow the El Salvador government."

Reagan, in a 10-minute appearance in the White House press room, declined to provide details of the alleged covert CIA operation that is creating increasing congressional opposition, but he said the United States is not violating the Boland Amendment, which prohibits its military aid to groups trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

Nevertheless, Reagan said he was hindered by the law. The Boland Amendment, he said, "is restrictive on the obligations that the Constitution imposes on the president. . . . But what I might personally wish, what our government might wish, still would not justify us violating the law of the land."

Before he spoke, however, members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee indicated they would support further tightening of the Boland Amendment. And one Democrat congressman, just returned from a visit to Nicaragua, said he was told by U.S. officials in

Managua that military supplies moving across the Nicaraguan border into El Salvador had stopped entirely within the last month — apparently before the U.S.-supported anti-Sandinista guerrillas went into action.

The president called for "perspective" on the situation, saying Soviet aid has created, in Nicaragua, "the biggest military force in Central America and large parts of South America," versus, "a few thousand Miskito Indians and guerrillas."

"I don't think it's reasonable to assume that that kind of a force could nurse any ambitions that they can overthrow that government with that great military force," Reagan said.

Far from relaxing the Boland Amendment, however, the House subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs earlier this week voted to tighten it up, totally banning military aid of any kind to anti-Sandinista guerrillas operating in Nicaragua, as well as cutting \$50 million from U.S. aid requested for El Salvador. Yesterday the State Department strongly criticized the House action.

"These actions regarding Nicaragua would signal to the Sandinistas that they could act with impunity regardless of how egregious their actions might become," State Department spokesman John Hughes said. "Decisions of this type destroy the capacity and continuity of our efforts. It also destroys confidence in our ability to pursue an effective foreign policy."

"On the basis of consultations we've had with a wide range of members of Congress, we believe

there's a broader understanding of the need for increased assistance to Central America as being in the national interest."

But that "broader understanding" was not apparent yesterday at a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing where the credibility of Assistant Secretary Thomas Enders was under strong attack by Democratic congressmen.

One of them, Rep. Robert G. Torricelli of New Jersey, just returned from a trip to Honduras and Nicaragua, said that contrary to the administration's allegations of weapons flowing through Nicaragua to guerrillas in El Salvador, he was told by five top officials of the U.S. Embassy in Managua that the supposed "flow" was, in fact, just a "trickle."

In the last 30 days, he said the officials told him, there have been no weapons crossing the border into El Salvador. In the last 60 days there was virtually nothing, and in the last six months there was "not much." And as for the Soviet assault helicopters he said the Nicaraguans are alleged to possess, he said they had three: "One was for

the pope, and one transported me and Congressman Bedell (one of four Americans in the party)," Torricelli said. "The only danger they pose would be if they fall on your head."

Torricelli also revealed that he and Rep. Berkley Bedell, D-Iowa, yesterday wrote a letter to Secretary of State George Shultz objecting to vague administration suggestions that Nicaragua could become a site for Soviet missiles aimed against the United States.

U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick mentioned that the Soviets were "toting and planning" for such a deployment in Central America on a TV program earlier this week,

and in questioning yesterday Enders alluded to the possibility that Sandinista leaders were seeking such missiles.

"The people of our country deserve to not be frightened by false issues and baseless charges which promote tension, confusion and fear," the congressmen wrote Shultz. Asked about the possibility of Soviet missiles in Nicaragua, State Department officials last night still were looking into the question.

The administration says it has been hampered in presenting its views by laws preventing the public disclosure of covert CIA operations, and at yesterday's hearing Enders appeared frustrated that all he could say to Torricelli and other committee members is that he would arrange a confidential intelligence briefing for them.

As the war of words deepened between Congress and the administration, there were these further developments:

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