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U.S. Approves Covert Plan In Nicaragua

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President Reagan has authorized covert operations against the Central American nation of Nicaragua, which, administration officials have charged, is serving as the military command center and supply line to guerrillas in El Salvador.

According to informed administration officials, the president has ruled out the use of U.S. military forces in direct anti-Nicaraguan operations. But the authorized, covert plan directs the CIA to begin to build and fund a paramilitary force of up to 500 Latin Americans, who are to operate out of commando camps spread along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border.

The officials stressed that it will take months for the paramilitary force to be recruited, trained and positioned to begin operations. They did not say precisely when the cross-border operations are scheduled to begin.

As part of this plan, the commandos eventually would attempt to destroy vital Nicaraguan targets, such as power plants and bridges, in an effort to disrupt the economy and divert the attention and the resources of the government. CIA strategists believe these covert operations inside Nicaragua will slow the flow of arms to El Salvador and disrupt what they claim is a Soviet- and Cuban-controlled government in Nicaragua.

Operating under a \$19 million CIA budget, the planned 500-man force could be increased in size if necessary, officials said. The CIA force would be supplemented by another Latin American commando force of up to 1,000 men—some of whom currently are undergoing training by Argentine military officials.

This is the plan for CIA covert operations first reported in The Washington Post on Feb. 14 as part of the Reagan administration's strategy in the region. At the time, it could not be determined whether the president had authorized the CIA's plan to build a paramilitary force against Nicaragua.

Several informed sources now say that the president did formally authorize the proposal, but the precise timing of his authorization could not be determined. It may have occurred late last year.

The covert action proposal was developed by the CIA and first presented in detail to President Reagan by CIA Director William J. Casey at the Nov. 16 meeting of the National Security Council. It was supported by Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, according to knowledgeable officials.

Administration officials familiar with the CIA covert program stressed that the decision to focus on economic targets was based on a desire to disrupt the Nicaraguan arms supply line to El Salvador in a manner that is relatively inexpensive and least threatening to the civilian population.

"If you blow up a dam, you cause a lot of trouble, but you're not killing people," one high-level official said.

In his Feb. 18 press conference, Reagan was asked if the United States was planning covert operations in Nicaragua, but he declined to comment.

Nicaragua currently is ruled by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, whose guerrilla forces overthrew the government of dictator Anastasio Somoza in July 1979.

Honduras has a close military relationship with the United States, and Honduran officials fear that the political upheaval in El Salvador and Nicaragua will spill into their country. As a separate part of the U.S. strategy in the region, the U.S. military currently is engaged in two operations in neighboring Honduras to indirectly support anti-Nicaraguan efforts, informed administration officials said.

According to NSC records, the proposal was approved in November 1981. The CIA has authorized a military program that funds a force of 500 men. Covert action records, including a memo from the CIA to the NSC, show that the proposal was approved in November 1981.

• "But the Central American

opposition front that would be nationalistic, anti-Cuban and anti-Somoza."

• "Support the opposition front through formation and training of action teams to collect intelligence and engage in paramilitary and political operations in Nicaragua and elsewhere."

• "Work primarily through non-Americans to achieve these covert objectives, but in some cases the CIA might take unilateral paramilitary action—possibly using U.S. personnel—against special Cuban targets."

After the initial presentation, the CIA proposal was turned over to the national security planning group, a subcommittee of the NSC, as a draft "presidential finding," which states the need for specific covert operations. Under national security statutes, no funds can be expended for covert actions "until the president finds that each such operation is important to the national security of the United States."

Senior U.S. defense and intelligence officials have said in recent weeks that without a slowdown in the arms supply to El Salvador by air, land and sea routes from Nicaragua, the position of government forces in the war-torn country could deteriorate rapidly, potentially prompting an escalation of Salvadoran requests for U.S. military assistance. Such requests are likely to run into strong congressional and public resistance.