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Compromise near on covert aid

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The White House and several House leaders of both parties are near agreement on a compromise approach to a controversial bill that seeks to cut off covert aid to insurgents fighting the leftist Nicaraguan Sandinista government, The Washington Times has learned.

Under the plan, the United States would immediately stop covert military and paramilitary aid to Nicaraguan rebels when the Sandinista government agrees to stop similar aid to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

The plan calls for the other countries in Central America to similarly agree not to aid insurgencies in neighboring nations. The United States would continue aiding the government of El Salvador.

There is no indication whether Nicaragua or the other countries would accept the plan if passed by Congress. One source said that special envoy Richard Stone, who has been traveling in Central America to seek a peaceful solution to the warfare there, has not been involved in the current plan.

The tentative agreement, based on a so-called "symmetry concept," was hammered out in a series of at least six meetings over the last several weeks.

Among those involved in the meetings, which have been held in the White House and the latest, yesterday, in the Capitol, are White House Chief of Staff James Baker; CIA Director William Casey; House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Clement Zablocki, D-Wis.; House Majority Leader James Wright, D-Texas; plus Rep. William Broomfield, R-Mich., and Rep. Dante Fascell, D-Fla., who are both senior members of the committee.

Also meeting with the group has been Rep. Bill Young, R-Fla., of the

Intelligence Committee. Young offered a similar symmetry proposal in April, but it was rejected.

Several people who attended or who have been briefed on the sessions gave differing assessments of how close the group is to a final agreement, though all were in agreement in outlining the proposal that is the result of their weeks of work.

One member of Congress said he believed that those listed above all "agree to the concept" while a highly placed staff aide said it was "highly premature" to say a final agreement had been reached.

Three new members joined the group yesterday, apparently in an effort to build a compromise with House Democrats who have been most opposed to U.S. policy in Central America.

The three were described as having made "positive contributions" to the work, but were not seen as ready to support the overall plan. They are Rep. Michael Barnes, D-Md., chairman of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee; Rep. William Alexander, D-Ark., part of the Democratic leadership; and Rep. Wyche Fowler, D-Ga., of the Intelligence Committee.

The planning group's concept is expected to be offered as an amendment next week on the House floor to a bill that would cut off covert funds to Nicaragua and replace it with an open aid program of aid to Central American governments to block the cross-border flow of arms to leftist guerillas.

A less controversial part of the package includes support for a bipartisan commission to study Central American problems and make U.S. policy recommendations.

The Reagan administration used "bipartisan commissions" to achieve a consensus on two earlier

initiatives that were also extremely controversial — a legislative plan to return the Social Security system to solvency, and funding to continue development of the MX missile.

The covert action bill that will be the vehicle for the compromise passed the House Foreign Relations Committee last month by a near party-line vote of 20-14, following what several members said was the most acrimonious debate they had seen in Congress. The bill had started in the Intelligence Committee under Rep. Edward Boland, D-Mass.

The bill will be considered under a highly unusual procedure that calls for four hours of debate in secret session, two hours in open session and 12 hours for amendments.

Many of the same negotiators tried to reach a compromise before the Foreign Relations Committee vote on June 7 but failed. One congressman working in the group said that a compromise can be reached now because Congress has learned a great deal more about Central America since then.

The bill is the result of congressional response to word that the Reagan administration was covertly aiding a guerrilla army of roughly 7,000 opposed to the Sandinistas.