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WASHINGTON TIMES

21 June 1985

Week of violence raises Reagan's ire

By Mary Belcher
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

President Reagan reacted quickly and harshly yesterday to the gunning down of Americans in El Salvador, declaring that the limits of the nation's tolerance "have been reached" and promising "appropriate and proportionate" responses to a week of violence.

Less than 24 hours after six Americans were gunned down in a San Salvador cafe, Mr. Reagan said, "I believe that our actions must be appropriate and proportionate to the criminal acts which have been taken against our citizens."

The president denounced responses of "pointless anger." But,

he said, "We also have our limits, and our limits have been reached."

On the hostage crisis in Beirut, administration officials said there has been little change in the situation, but they reasserted their claim that Shi'ite militia leader Nabih Berri can exercise his influence to resolve the situation.

Mr. Reagan was awakened early yesterday morning by National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane with news of the Salvadoran attack,

according to White House spokesman Larry Speakes.

Administration officials for the past week have been working around the clock to resolve the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines jet by Moslem Shi'ite terrorists, who have killed one American and still hold more than 40 hostages.

Unnamed terrorists two days ago bombed Frankfurt's airport, killing three people and adding to the wave of attacks.

Mr. Reagan called terrorism "a war against all of civilized society."

"This is a war in which innocent civilians are intentional victims and our servicemen have become specific targets," he said. "This cannot continue."

Mr. Speakes said the president's words "underscore the strong feeling that the United States must do more to counter terrorism."

"It means we are now drawing the line," Mr. Speakes said.

The president ordered the secretary of state and secretary of defense to provide "whatever assistance is necessary" to El Salvador "to find and punish the terrorists who perpetrated this act."

He also will speed up the delivery of military equipment and assistance to El Salvador to "prosecute their campaign against the communist guerrillas," who the administration believes are responsible for the

San Salvador attack, he said.

The United States will not, however, use military force in El Salvador, Mr. Speakes said. Instead, the United States simply will support El Salvador's "very strong and competent government" and "very strong and competent military."

In Beirut, by contrast, the administration is leaving the door open to military retaliation against the hijackers who hold American hostages.

"Our first priority is to secure the swift and safe return of those being held in the Middle East," Mr. Speakes said. "What happens after that remains to be seen."

He refused to elaborate on what the president meant by promising "appropriate and proportionate" responses to acts of terrorism. He would rather "leave it to those who are responsible [for acts of terrorism] to wonder," He said.

Administration officials denounced a press conference Mr. Berri held yesterday in Beirut, in which he produced — but did not release — five of the American hostages. White House spokesman Robert Sims called the press conference a "cynical exploitation" of the situation.

Although they contend Mr. Berri holds the key to resolving the hostage crisis, White House officials have said they do not regard him as part of the problem. A senior administration official refused to comment about whether yesterday's

press conference implicated Mr. Berri in the crime.

The hijackers have demanded the release from Israel of 700 to 800 Shi'ite prisoners, which Israel has said it would do only if explicitly asked by the United States. But the administration has said it will make no such request.

Mr. Speakes continued to deny reports that the White House had asked the International Red Cross to be a negotiator in the hostage situation.

Red Cross President Alexandre Hay met with Mr. Reagan at the White House yesterday afternoon for a long-scheduled picture-taking session, but Mr. Hay said the president did not ask for his help.

"We stand ready, but that is all," Mr. Hay said. "We are not yet involved."

The president did tell Mr. Hay that he would appreciate any information the Red Cross could obtain on the condition of the hostages, according to White House aides.

The Red Cross has requested permission to visit the hostages to check their condition, Mr. Hay said.

U.S. intelligence provides no indication of a centrally directed terrorism plot against U.S. military personnel worldwide despite recent attacks, the Defense Department said yesterday.

"I'm aware of nothing that would indicate that there is a centralized plot or terrorism against U.S. personnel throughout the world," Pentagon spokesman Michael Burch said.

There may be branches of terrorist organizations in several different countries, "but, as far as a worldwide effort, no, I don't see that," the assistant defense secretary said.

He said he saw no connection between the terrorist killing of four Marines in El Salvador Wednesday and the weekend slaying of Robert Dean Stethem on the hijacked TWA airliner in the Middle East, he said.

Four of the six Americans killed in San Salvador were off-duty Marine embassy guards. Mr. Speakes said there are reports that the gunmen fired their first bullets at the guards, who were dressed in civilian clothes.

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Administration officials strongly suspect that leftist guerrillas launched the attack in San Salvador. The leftists recently have made "blatant threats" of such attacks in the wake of the failure of their military operations in the countryside, Mr. Speakes said.

A senior administration official said there is no evidence of Nicaraguan involvement in the San Salvador attack. But, he said, "We do know Nicaragua has actively supported the leftists in El Salvador who are presumably behind this act."

The president is "satisfied" with current CIA intelligence-gathering on terrorism but is always seeking to improve those capabilities, Mr. Speakes said.

Walter Andrews and Stephanie Nall contributed to this article.