

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE ~~1A~~MIAMI HERALD  
5 November 1985

# Spy plane spots cargo in Cuba

## May be Soviet arms bound for Nicaragua

By ALFONSO CHARDY  
Herald Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A U.S. spy plane that flew over Cuba late last week spotted Soviet and Bulgarian freighters transferring crates that may contain as many as 23 Soviet-made tanks, assorted missiles and other weaponry onto two small Nicaraguan vessels. U.S. intelligence officials disclosed Monday.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes characterized the development as "serious" and accused Nicaragua of a "steep increase" in arms shipments from the Soviet bloc, apparently to mount a new offensive to wipe out the U.S.-funded Nicaraguan insurgents.

At a White House briefing, Speakes refused to comment on a Washington Times report that, during its flight over Cuba Thursday night, the high-flying American SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft was fired on with Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles.

Other administration sources said the plane's sensors picked up heat-seeking missiles in the area of its flight path, but it was uncertain whether the aircraft was being fired on.

If it was, it apparently would be the first time an American spy plane has been fired on over Cuba since a U2 aircraft was shot down during the 1962 missile crisis. Pieces of that aircraft are now on display at the Museum of the Revolution in Havana.

The Cuban Interests Section here refused to comment on the shipping activity, but a Cuban diplomatic source noted that his country had warned the United States in August — following a reconnaissance plane flight — that future incidents of that kind "would not go

unpunished."

The Nicaraguan Embassy indirectly acknowledged that the weapons were bound for Nicaragua. "The point is not whether Nicaragua is getting weapons in the Soviet Union or through Cuba ... but this is just another pretext for the administration to attack Nicaragua and justify aid to the contras," said embassy spokeswoman Sarali Porta.

U.S. intelligence officials said the presence of the Soviet, Bulgarian and Nicaraguan vessels at the Cuban port of Mariel, 25 miles west of Havana, was first reported by informants who had sighted the ships there early last week.

They said they initially had been hampered in obtaining information about their cargo because a heavy cloud cover over the area had

As a result of the tip about the ships, the officials said, the National Security Council authorized the dispatch of the Blackbird to Cuba.

Officials said the reconnaissance plane obtained photographs of the port that were analyzed by intelligence experts and "cratologists," specialists in the shape and size of Soviet-bloc shipping crates. They concluded the cargo crates contained at least 23 T-54 and T-55 Soviet-built tanks, "assorted" surface-to-air missiles, several pieces of heavy artillery and "possibly planes."

But the officials cautioned that if indeed there are planes, they apparently are not sophisticated combat jets such as MiGs. Washington has repeatedly warned Managua not to obtain MiGs — or risk American military retaliation.

American officials believe the Nicaraguan vessels receiving the cargo are small coastal freighters

that will carry it to the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast port of El Bluff, then up a river to the town of Rama in south-central Nicaragua. From there, they expect the materiel to be loaded onto military trucks for distribution to several military bases.

A U.S. intelligence official said American spy planes probably would track the Nicaraguan vessels to their home port to obtain further confirmation that their cargo is indeed arms.

The Air Force supersonic jet entered Cuban airspace at 9:58 p.m. Thursday at San Antonio de los Banos, over the western province of Pinar del Rio.

At the time, Cuban government officials said that, after flying over the island, the plane veered back toward the United States at 10:25 p.m. but then returned 15 minutes later for another overflight.

The plane finally left Cuban airspace at 10:53 p.m., departing over an area 20 miles northwest of Havana, near Mariel, Cuban officials said.

Prensa Latina, the Cuban news agency, said the spy flight was the second American violation of Cuban airspace in less than three months. Thousands of Cubans demonstrated Friday in front of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana to protest. The Cuban government filed a protest with the United States, Prensa Latina reported.

Speakes confirmed the reconnaissance flight over Cuba, adding the United States had "observed an increase of military shipments from the Soviet Union to Nicaragua" in the past month.

Speakes also noted that "the renewed military buildup coincides with the Sandinista government's crackdown on civil liberties and a military offensive against the democratic resistance in Nicaragua."