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Watching Soviet ship in Nicaragua, U.S. warns against sending MiGs

J By Alfonso Chardy
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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration said yesterday that it has warned the Soviet Union not to deliver advanced warplanes to Nicaragua and that U.S. intelligence is keeping watch on a Soviet freighter now in a Nicaraguan port that could be carrying MiG-21 jet fighters.

State Department spokesman John Hughes said the warning was delivered to Soviet officials here and in Moscow on Tuesday, shortly after U.S. intelligence analysts alerted the administration about the presence of the freighter, which docked yesterday at the Nicaraguan Pacific port of Corinto.

And President Reagan declared during a news conference yesterday in Los Angeles that any arrival of MiGs in Nicaragua would unsettle the balance of military force in the region and "would indicate the Sandinistas are contemplating being a threat to their neighbors here in the Americas."

Meanwhile, Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto told a news conference in Managua that no warplanes were aboard the ship. He said it had been "harassed by a ship, fast launches and North American planes that violated Nicaraguan waters."

D'Escoto did not describe the cargo that he said had been unloaded at Corinto, and the Pentagon denied that U.S. ships and planes had violated Nicaraguan territorial waters or airspace.

Hughes and other U.S. officials emphasized that intelligence analysts were not sure whether the ship was carrying warplanes, and they refused to say what the administration would do if MiGs were on board.

"We are reiterating our position and underlining how imprudent it would be for aircraft, should they be on that ship or any other ship, to arrive in Nicaragua," Hughes said. He said that delivery of advanced warplanes would be viewed "with the utmost concern" by the administration.

President Reagan, speaking at a news conference in Los Angeles, also refused to discuss possible action if advanced warplanes were delivered to Nicaragua. However, other administration officials reiterated previous statements that U.S. options include the use of military force to destroy the planes.

Hughes and other officials urged reporters to use "extreme caution" in dealing with the story of the ship because of the uncertainty surrounding the contents of the shipping crates.

"Our 'cratologists' are certain that those crates associated with the ship in question are identical in size and shape as crates the Soviets have used in the past to ship MiGs to other places, but we have no absolute proof," one senior administration official said.

On Tuesday night, the Nicaraguan government "categorically" denied that any advanced aircraft were being shipped to the country. It contended that the U.S. administration's concern was an attempt "to create a condition or climate which it would then use as a justification to carry out its attacks against the people and government of Nicaragua."

Miriam Hooker, spokeswoman for the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington, also denied reports in the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal that Bulgarian ships recently delivered a consignment of military attack helicopters to Nicaragua.

A White House official said U.S. concerns about Nicaragua have been heightened recently by the delivery of Soviet-made radar equipment, anti-aircraft guns and armored personnel carriers.

Nicaraguan diplomats in Washington, while not specifically denying that their government is receiving new arms shipments, said Nicaragua needs to arm itself to repel a feared U.S. invasion.

At the State Department, Hughes refused to be specific about the warning sent to the Soviet Union or to discuss any Soviet response, except to say that the warning did not contain a threat of invasion. It appeared that no formal protest had been sent to Nicaragua, but a State Department spokeswoman said the Nicaraguans are "well aware of our position" on advanced combat aircraft. Hughes said, "We've made it clear that we deplore the continuing military buildup in Nicaragua, especially when that country already has created an overwhelming military imbalance in the region.

"And as we have indicated before and made very clear to the various parties concerned, the addition of advanced combat aircraft to the Sandinista military arsenal would be a serious development which the United States would view with the utmost concern, and we are monitoring the situation carefully."

Hughes also said, "Concerns have been raised, obviously, about the contents of that ship, and certainly we are reiterating our position and underlining how imprudent it would be for aircraft, should they be on that ship or any other ship, to arrive in Nicaragua."

In Nicaragua, a Western diplomat, who asked not to be identified, told United Press International that "25 Nicaraguans have been trained in Bulgaria to pilot 21 Soviet MiGs. Now, these pilots are in Nicaragua."

The MiG-21 is an advanced tactical jet fighter designed for air-to-air combat. It has a normal range of about 700 miles.

The Nicaraguan government is building an airport large enough to handle sophisticated jet fighters at Punta Huete, near Managua. It reportedly will be ready at the end of this year.

Separately, a senior U.S. official

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said the Soviet freighter has been under U.S. aerial and satellite surveillance since shortly after it departed from a Black Sea port in late September or early October.

The official said that U.S. intelligence sources within the Soviet Union first spotted the distinctive crates used to ship MiG-21s sitting on the docks before the ship sailed. U.S. sources apparently did not see the crates being loaded and could not determine whether MiGs were inside, he added.

When the ship left port, the CIA and the Pentagon began tracking the ship from both high-flying spy aircraft and orbiting satellites. At one point the United States concluded that the ship was headed for Peru with a shipment of spare parts for Soviet-built military equipment in use there, and surveillance was relaxed. But it was recently resumed when the vessel bypassed Peru and headed toward Nicaragua's port of Corinto.

"That's when alarm bells started going off around here," the official said.

The official said the administration has refrained from making a direct charge that the vessel is carrying MiGs, in part because the Soviet Union is not known to have shipped military equipment directly to Nicaragua before and because sensitive military equipment normally is shipped into the more secluded Caribbean coast ports of El Bluff or Puerto Cabezas.

In addition, he said, U.S. intelligence analysts "have no absolute proof in this case. It is a suspicion — but an educated suspicion."