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White House presses Latin policy

By Alfonso Chardy
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Regardless of world or domestic opinion, President Reagan intends to oppose the spread of communism into Central America even if he has to send U.S. troops there, several top administration officials said yesterday.

Their statements came as Congress continued to consider Reagan's requests for \$61.7 million in emergency aid for the Salvadoran army and \$21 million for Nicaraguan rebels. The officials specified that U.S. forces would be used only if Congress failed to support those policies and if collapse of the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador seemed imminent.

"Central America is of vital importance to this administration," said an official who requested anonymity. "Thereby, this president intends not to allow the communists in El Salvador to come to power or the Marxist-led Sandinistas in Nicaragua to take over the region with the help of Cuba and the Soviet Union."

Another official took a similarly tough stance about Central America and Congress.

"We are following normal procedures and are simply asking the Congress for its support for our policies," he said. "But if it does not want to give it, then the situation will be more difficult."

"But regardless of public opinion here and abroad, and the mood of the Congress, this president will continue to support the forces of freedom in Nicaragua and in El Salvador, even if that means using American combat troops."

These and other officials at the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon — all involved with U.S. policy in the region — said that Central America was the administration's main concern in the world and therefore was a test of U.S. resolve in the eyes of adversaries such as the Soviet Union and Cuba.

"We cannot fail there," one official said. "We must stick by our friends or our credibility will be lost forever in the region. There can be no Lebanon debacle in Central America."

But congressional leaders, sound-

ing equally tough, warned that they would not be intimidated into endorsing Reagan's policies. They predicted that White House military-aid programs for El Salvador and CIA-backed Nicaraguan insurgents would not be approved in the Democratic-controlled House.

House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D., Mass.), in a briefing for reporters, predicted that the House would kill the "covert" operation, forcing the CIA to abandon its support for the Nicaraguan rebels. O'Neill also predicted that the House would substantially cut the emergency military-aid package for the Salvadoran army.

The emergency aid requests — \$61.7 million for El Salvador and \$21 million for the Nicaraguan insurgents — were overwhelmingly approved by the Senate on Thursday in what administration officials hailed as a demonstration of bipartisan support for Reagan's policies.

But O'Neill said that the prospects for passage of such legislation in the House had been harmed by reports over the weekend that the administration was drawing contingency plans to send combat troops to Central America, that the CIA was responsible for the mining of Nicaraguan ports and that the President had decided not to accept, for two years, World Court jurisdiction in disputes involving the region.

This last decision, condemned by O'Neill, was based on information that the Nicaraguan government was planning to bring charges against the United States at the court in The Hague, Netherlands. Nicaragua did file such charges later yesterday.

According to the rules of the World Court, a nation can only refuse to be judged by the court before its case is filed, as the United States has done.

"The unprecedented decision by the Reagan administration to turn its back on the World Court and suspend its jurisdiction over disputes we are having in Central America is shocking," O'Neill said. "Up to this

point, I have contended that the Reagan administration's secret war against Nicaragua was morally indefensible; today it is clear that it is legally indefensible as well."

O'Neill said that if and when differing versions of the aid bills come before a House-Senate conference committee to be reconciled, he would instruct House conferees to vote against the covert program. He also predicted that Reagan's aid request for El Salvador would be cut in the House.

"I believe the covert action is dead," O'Neill said. "The House last year voted twice to end this program and would have voted against the \$21 million again this year anyway, but it certainly didn't help the administration to back away from the World Court or to be mining Nicaraguan ports."

Administration officials talked tough yesterday on those points, too. They said privately that even if Congress cut aid to El Salvador, Reagan would use his emergency powers to provide military aid to the Salvadorans from contingency funds. Key legislators have warned Reagan against such a step.

And if the House scraps the covert program, the administration officials said, it is likely that the CIA may circumvent congressional procedure and send aid to the insurgents from reserve funds.

Publicly, administration officials declined comment on the harbor-mining operation, denied that any contingency plans were being made to send troops to Central America and defended shunning the World Court on the ground that Nicaragua needed to be prevented from turning the court into a forum for anti-American propaganda.

But privately, senior officials acknowledged that the CIA was directly in charge of the mining operation and that the mining was conducted from an agency-controlled vessel that cruises up and down Nicaragua's Pacific and Caribbean coasts.

The officials also said that while it was not true that contingency plans for sending combat troops were actively being drawn up, a review of standing contingency plans had been in progress for a while.