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CIA Calls Shots Against Nicaragua

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CIA officials have told Congress that the intelligence agency has assumed virtual day-to-day control over guerrillas fighting the Nicaraguan government, pinpointing their targets and plotting their attacks, according to congressional sources.

The CIA defends its increased control over the Nicaraguan guerrillas by contending that it guarantees the "secret war" will remain within congressionally approved guidelines.

Congressional intelligence sources say, however, that they doubt the CIA's claims and fear the covert operation may be out of control — and in violation of U.S. laws.

New evidence of the increased scope of American involvement emerged last week as Congress began questioning whether the CIA had exceeded its authority. By law, that authority is limited to using the Nicaraguan rebels to interdict alleged weapons shipments from Nicaragua to guerrillas fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador.

Sources in Washington and in Honduras say the CIA role shifted within the past month from arm's length contacts with the guerrillas to face-to-face and daily direction of a force whose avowed intention is to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

The sources, some of them briefed by CIA officials on the nature of American involvement, said the CIA had provided the following examples of its activities:

- CIA and U.S. military intelligence operatives now confer daily with leaders of the 4,000 to 6,000 anti-Sandinista rebels operating inside Nicaragua and on the Honduran side of the 400-mile border.

- American agents pinpoint targets for the rebels, plot how and when the targets should be attacked and debrief raiders when they return to Honduras from Nicaragua.

- CIA officials are asking Congress for an additional \$20 million — perhaps as much as \$25 million — to continue the operation well into 1984.

- "Thousands" of CIA-ordered listening devices and metal detectors are being deployed along Honduran-Nicaraguan border areas believed to be supply routes for arms to Salvadoran guerrillas.

- U.S. spy planes — as many as five of them — their fuselages bristling with antennas, regularly sweep the border, as well as air and sea lanes between Cuba and Nicaragua.

According to CIA officials at briefings for congressmen, the thrust of the U.S. campaign continues to be to interdict the flow of weapons to El Salvador and to gather intelligence on Sandinista and Cuban activities in Nicaragua.

"We are being told that, every day, Americans remind the rebels in Honduras what the purposes of the missions are, and not to exceed their orders," said a skeptical congressional intelligence source who asked to remain anonymous. "They tell us that preserving U.S. control of the operation is now more of a priority than deniability."

Liberal congressmen argue, however, that the scope of covert war already exceeds levels approved by the House and Senate Intelligence Oversight subcommittees. They call for an end to the operation.

Congressional sources said President Reagan signed a "presidential finding" in November 1981 certifying the need for a covert CIA campaign to stem the unrest that he accused Nicaragua and Cuba of sowing throughout Central America.

The finding was accompanied by a \$19.9-million budget, much of it to expand U.S. intelligence-gathering operations curtailed during the CIA upheavals of the mid-1970s, the sources said.

Other congressional sources said only \$1.5 million to \$3 million went to train and arm the Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), at the time largely made up of Nicaraguan National Guardsmen who fled to Honduras after the Sandinistas toppled President Anastasio Somoza in 1979.

\$20-million request

CIA Director William Casey asked Congress in January for about \$20 million to continue funding the covert campaign into the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, congressional intelligence sources added.

To preserve Washington's "deniability," the early U.S. money was channeled to the FDN through Argentine military intelligence officers drawn to Central America as counterweight to the Argentine leftists who flocked to Managua after the Sandinista triumph.

But Argentina reportedly recalled most of its agents after the United States sided with Britain during the Falklands/Malvinas war last year. Only a handful of Argentines remained with the FDN by year's end, among them Col. Carmelo Gigante, who was awarded a Honduran army medal in February.

CIA officials, in secret briefings with congressmen, reported that the U.S. intelligence contingent in Honduras was forced to expand to take up the Argentines' slack, congressional sources said.

Late last year, according to the CIA briefers, the agency ordered the FDN to shut down its Honduran training bases and move into Nicaragua to increase the pressure on the Sandinistas to stop shipping weapons to El Salvador.

The congressional sources say that by then, the "secret war" was

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being run by a three-tiered command system made up of one level composed entirely of Americans, a Nicaraguan rebel "high command" and a "logistics" section made up largely of Honduran Army officers.

Although FDN sources described the 100 to 150 Americans in Honduras as the "top bosses" of the operation, some U.S. and Honduran sources described it more in terms of a "brain trust."

Largely made up of CIA and Pentagon intelligence analysts and led by U.S. Ambassador John D. Negroponte, the group's main job is to analyze the raw data flowing in from spy operations directed against Nicaragua.

Missile threats

The congressional sources said the spying part of the campaign took on an urgent character last month, when the Soviets threatened to station nuclear missiles in Nicaragua if Reagan based new missiles in Western Europe.

"We are waiting for that fateful day when we'll discover such a weapon in the aerial photographs and wind up with a Nicaraguan missile crisis," said one source.

The congressional sources say CIA officials have told them that high-flying SR71 spy planes are flying over Nicaragua, while U.S. technicians monitor radio transmissions inside Nicaragua.

Pentagon spokesman Col. Michael Burch confirmed in a Washington briefing Thursday that Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft "have operated" in the Caribbean and Central America "and may operate there in the future."

Honduran military sources in Tegucigalpa said at least three and perhaps four smaller Beechcraft Queen Air aircraft, owned by the U.S. military and loaded with sophisticated monitoring equipment, also patrol the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, as well as air and sea lanes between Nicaragua and Cuba.

A Honduran pilot who regularly sees the twin-engine planes at the Tegucigalpa International Airport said the pilots were Americans in civilian clothes. Two of the planes he has seen were painted in the U.S. Army white and green, and one or two others wear the grey and white colors of the U.S. Air Force, the pilot said.

"They had so many antennas sticking out of the top of their fuselages that they looked like sailfish," said the pilot.

Other intelligence information is gathered by U.S. Navy destroyers patrolling Nicaragua's Pacific coast and by U.S. intelligence operatives inside Nicaragua, the sources said.

One congressional source said still more information comes from sound and metal detectors seeded along a sector of the Honduran-Nicaraguan border allegedly used to smuggle guns to El Salvador.

"Thousands of these gadgets went down from electronics companies in the United States," the source said.

'Paige Electronics'

Reporters in Tegucigalpa earlier this month met two American men who identified themselves only as "consultants" working for "Paige Electronics." There is no firm by that name, but during the Vietnam war Paige Communications Engineering of Vienna, Va., worked under a CIA contract to build electronic detection devices and deploy them along the famed Ho Chi Minh Trail.

A spokesman for the firm, now named Continental-Paige Communications, Wednesday said, "We have no one working for us in that area [Honduras] and we are unaware of anyone masquerading as our employees in the area."

Honduran police early this month announced they had killed two Nicaraguan gunrunners in southeastern Honduras carrying notebooks stuffed with information on their routes. Honduran army officers later claimed they had plotted the villages and farms named in the notebooks and showed reporters a pin-pocked map marking a 10-mile wide infiltration "corridor" straddling the border.

CIA briefers have told congressmen that the raw intelligence data gathered are collated with the goal of finding ways to stop the arms flow to El Salvador.

Congressional sources quoted CIA officials as saying the U.S. intelligence analysts zero in on areas allegedly used by the Sandinistas to train Salvadoran rebels with the help of Cuban advisers; Nicaraguan villages alleged to be part of the arms infiltration corridor; Sandinista military units patrolling delivery routes; and units delivering the weapons.

CIA officials have told congressmen that a separate group of U.S. operatives then selects likely targets for FDN attacks, decides how and when to hit them and passes on the plans to FDN leaders through go-betweens who can be American, Argentine, or Honduran. U.S. intelligence operatives debrief the raiders when they return to Honduras, the sources added.

Praise for FDN

The congressional sources said CIA officials credit the FDN with severely pinching the flow of weapons to El Salvador and sending back "a mass of information" on Sandinista and Cuban deployments inside Nicaragua.

FDN leaders themselves have never made such a claim. In their public comments, they stress that they are fighting to topple the Sandinistas and that they have no particular concern about the flow of arms to El Salvador.

CIA officials told Congress that FDN guerrillas "by and large" obeyed the guidelines for their attacks, the sources said, although they acknowledged the rebels also carried out other raids in pursuit of their own political goals.

Congressional sources said that although most of the American agents in Honduras are intelligence analysts, they also include 50 or 60 U.S. military officers — all in plain clothes and many of them of Puerto Rican or Cuban descent — in charge of daily contacts with the FDN rebels.

Intelligence is passed along to the Honduran army, which is con-

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cerned about Nicaragua's Soviet-backed military buildup, as well as to Salvadoran military leaders, the sources added.

The information that goes to the FDN, according to the sources, is handed over to a six-man guerrilla "high command" led by Enrique Bermudez, a former National Guard colonel who served as Somoza's military attache in Washington for several years.

CIA briefers have told Congress, the sources said, that most of the FDN guerrillas were trained by former guardsmen, although some were trained by Argentine and Honduran military advisers in special skills such as demolitions.

The CIA has assured congressmen that no Americans accompany the FDN guerrillas into Nicaragua, sources said, although the agency briefers added that some Honduran officers may have joined them.

Arming the rebels

The CIA briefers, the sources said, also reported that most of the logistics involved in the U.S. campaign were controlled by the Hon-

duran military, commanded by Gen. Gustavo Alvarez.

Although Alvarez has ordered all his troops to cooperate with the FDN, he has also detailed a small group of his brightest officers to serve as liaison with the Americans and the Nicaraguans, the sources said.

The sources said CIA officials told Congress that the Honduran army initially armed the FDN from supplies of old weapons and munitions — after Washington had promised to replace the materiel.

FDN sources said they bought other weapons in the black market, most of them in Miami, with money donated by "certain sectors" in Panama, Venezuela and Colombia that oppose the Sandinistas' Marxist bent.

But CIA officials told congressmen that as the FDN grew, the U.S. operatives began arranging shipments of newer and more powerful weapons, the congressional sources said.

New American weapons delivered by the United States to the Honduran army wound up in FDN hands. Soviet weapons captured by

the Israelis in Lebanon and by anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan were shipped to Honduras, the sources quoted the CIA as saying.

Most of the best weaponry — RPG7 rocket launchers, 60mm mortars, FAL and AK47 assault rifles — went to the FDN and gave it firepower beyond all proportion to its reported 2,000 to 3,000 fighters.

The older weapons, including World War II-era M1 carbines, went to the reported 2,000 to 3,000 Miskito Indians fighting the Sandinistas in the eastern portion of Nicaragua, FDN sources said.

The involvement of Americans, Nicaraguans and Hondurans in the covert operation has created some confusing and bizarre situations.

One Honduran air taxi pilot banking his twin-engine aircraft over a grass airstrip near the border with Nicaragua aborted a landing when he noticed that someone had just mowed the grass.

"I am not landing there," he told his charterer. "A month ago the grass was tall and I don't know who cut it — the CIA, the counter-revolutionaries or the Honduran Army."