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Reagan staff to test mood in Congress

By George de Lama
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WASHINGTON—President Reagan is being urged by top aides to step up his public attacks against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government and launch an all-out campaign to renew military aid for Nicaraguan rebels, administration sources said.

Reagan is considering requesting \$40 million in military aid this year for the contras, as the rebels are known, and has ordered senior advisers to "test the waters" in Congress before going ahead, the sources said.

Some White House officials, however, fear that a defeat in Congress on the contra aid after a high-profile presidential lobbying blitz would be a major political blow for Reagan and could heighten the perception that he is a lame-duck President.

Congress cut off covert U.S. military aid to the contras last year but later agreed to provide \$27 million in so-called "humanitarian" assistance for nonlethal supplies after Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega traveled to Moscow to request Soviet military aid.

The "humanitarian" assistance is scheduled to run out March 31, forcing Reagan to decide during the next two or three weeks whether he will renew the request for nonlethal aid or seek a resumption of direct military assistance.

"I'm confident the President is going to go for the military aid," said one senior administration official, speaking on the condition he not be identified. "It all depends on how we see the mood in Congress. So far, we think the chances for approval look good."

Even if Reagan decides to forgo seeking military aid and instead simply requests additional "humanitarian" funding for the contras, he will ask for \$36 million, a 33 percent increase from last year, officials said.

Reagan stepped up his anti-Sandinista rhetoric over the weekend, using his weekly radio address Saturday to describe the Managua regime as "a communistic dictatorship that wages war against its own people."

In his address, Reagan reiterated his oft-expressed vow to continue seeking U.S. financial support for the contras fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government.

"The answer to Central America's problems is political and economic freedom, not Soviet tanks and ruthless regimes like the communistic dictatorship in Nicaragua that wages war with its own

people," he said. "And this is why the United States will continue to support those fighting for freedom and democracy Nicaragua."

Among the top aides pressing for a major presidential lobbying effort for resumption of military aid are White House communications director Patrick Buchanan, national security adviser John Poindexter, Secretary of State George Shultz, CIA Director William Casey and Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams, the sources said.

White House chief of staff Donald Regan, however, and other domestic political advisers are urging caution, concerned that Democrats in Congress might try to make the contra aid a campaign issue during this year's congressional elections.

Reagan aides acknowledge that, so far, Democrats are at best lukewarm to the idea of resuming military aid to the contras, particularly after news reports that some of the rebels were being investigated by officials of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for alleged cocaine trafficking.

During Reagan's trip last Friday to Mexicali, Mexico, for meetings with Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid, senior administration officials denied those news reports and asserted there was no evidence of contra involvement in drug trafficking.

"There is not and never has been an investigation," said one official.

Some congressional critics of administration policy are likely to try to link approval of any contra aid to an administration pledge to resume negotiations with the Sandinistas.

The administration cut off direct talks with the Sandinistas last January, insisting that bilateral discussions would not resume until the Nicaraguan government opened a dialogue with the contras and instituted other reforms. The Sandinistas have so far refused.

Some senior administration officials, mindful of the way congressional Democrats changed their minds last year about aiding the contras after Ortega went to Moscow, said the administration will try to use the Sandinistas' recent actions in its new lobbying bid.

In particular, Reagan can be expected to publicly criticize the Sandinistas' recent closing of Radio Catolica, the official Roman Catholic Church radio station in Nicaragua, the officials said.

Reagan also is planning to speak out about Managua's warm expression of "revolutionary solidarity" with the Palestine Liberation Organization on the occasion of the PLO's 21st anniversary last week.

Coinciding with the recent wave of Palestinian terrorism in Europe and the Middle East, the Sandinistas' public embrace of the PLO is seen by administration officials as another example of Managua's poor sense of political timing.

"In some ways, the Sandinistas themselves are the best thing we've got going for us," said one Reagan aide. "We're confident we can always count on them doing something that will help us out."