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U.S. raid on rebels considered

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration seriously considered ordering an air strike against a rebel base in El Salvador, and "we don't foreclose" the possibility of bombing guerrilla training bases in Nicaragua, a senior administration official disclosed Thursday.

U.S. intelligence officials also are trying to pinpoint supply lines from Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador to "find an appropriate target" for U.S. military strikes, the official said.

"Our confidence is growing that we will be able to do that," said the official, who spoke on condition that he not be identified.

On another front, it was disclosed that the administration favors raising the reward for information on terrorists tenfold, to \$5 million, in an effort to entice Lebanese informants into turning in the two hijackers of a TWA airliner who murdered a Navy diver last month.

President Reagan ordered his advisers to draw up plans for a surgical air strike against a Salvadoran rebel base in retaliation for the machine-gun murders June 19 of six Americans, including four marine guards assigned to the U.S. Embassy, at an outdoor cafe in San Salvador, the senior official said.

Reagan also instructed White House and Pentagon officials to look into the possibility of launching another type of military attack, including a commando raid, on the base if an air strike were not feasible, the official said.

But after reviewing intelligence reports and battle options, Reagan decided against the attack because it might have caused civilian casualties and because the rebels might already have moved.

"You have to have high confidence in identity, location, timeliness of the target—that who is there is going to be there when you hit it, and nobody else is there," said the official, who was involved in planning for the attack.

The attack was to have been carried out against a suspected base of the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party [PRTC], a "leftist guerrilla faction that claimed responsibility for the slayings of the Americans as they sat sipping beers at a fashionable cafe in the Salvadoran capital.

Despite Reagan's strong desire to retaliate for the slayings, particularly those of the unarmed fiatines, there was too much ambiguity in the intelligence reports to allow action on them, the official said.

"It was a combination of factors," he said, explaining why the attack never was made. "On the one hand, collateral risk [of killing civilians]. And on the other, some ambiguity in the evidence, both geography and the identity of those present."

The official disputed a New York Times report, published Wednesday, that said the administration considered an air strike against a training base for Salvadoran rebels in Nicaragua, but he would not rule out such an attack in the future.

"That article two days ago was a little off the mark, because it was suggesting we were preoccupied with a target in Nicaragua," the official said. "We weren't. To the contrary, we were more seized with whether a center of operations for the PRTC in El Salvador could be identified with such confidence and without such collateral damage as to make feasible action.

"So it wasn't at the time a review of Nicaraguan targets. That said, we don't foreclose that. We just weren't doing that."

The State Department warned Nicaragua last week that the United States would hold its Sandinista government responsible for any terrorist attack against Americans anywhere in Central America, and that the United States should be expected to "respond appropriately."

Citing intelligence reports that Nicaragua supports the PRTC guerrillas responsible for the Salvadoran slayings and that the leftist Sandinista regime is involved in terrorist attacks being planned against American personnel in neighboring Honduras, the administration warned of "serious consequences."

Nicaragua has strongly denied that it supports or practices terrorism in the region, and it has accused the United States of conducting state-sponsored terrorism

with its support for anti-Sandinista rebels. The administration has consistently denied the charges, as well as allegations by the Sandinistas that the United States plans to invade Nicaragua.

In a speech two weeks ago, Reagan singled out Nicaragua as one of five "outlaw nations" that "are now engaged in acts of war against the people and government of the United States."

Linking Nicaragua with Libya, Iran, Cuba and North Korea, Reagan said those states are run "by the strangest collection of misfits, looney tunes and squalid criminals since the advent of the Third Reich."

The senior administration official said the rhetorical offensive came because the White House wanted to keep the pressure on Nicaragua in spite of the United States having been distracted by the Beirut hostage crisis, particularly after the slayings in El Salvador.

"It was just to remove any ambiguity from their minds that might have derived from our apparent focus being the Middle East in connection with the hijacking," the official said. "Our statements might have been taken as mostly oriented towards the Middle East. [But] if they had been under the illusion that there were a different criterion applied to Nicaragua or El Salvador or anywhere else in Latin America as distinct from the Middle East, we wanted to remove that."

Vice President George Bush presided over the first meeting Thursday of an interagency task force on terrorism created by Reagan in response to the TWA hijacking and the Salvadoran killings.

In an interview this week, Bush said one of the chief goals of the task force would be to "define terrorism," reach "agreement and consensus on retaliation" and "sort out what is acceptable and what is unacceptable on pre-emption."

While Bush and the task force also focus on ways to improve intelligence cooperation with U.S. allies, top White House officials favor asking Congress to increase the reward money offered for information leading to the capture of terrorists.

Under current law, the President can instruct the secretary of state to offer up to a \$500,000 reward for such information out of a \$5 million fund at his disposal. Last week the State Department offered \$100,000 for information leading to the prosecution of the Salvadoran killers.

White House officials want to raise the top amount payable to any one individual to \$5 million, though one senior official said that much would not be given often.

"We're looking at what really gives you the latitude to meet the scale of the threat right now, and one of five [per individual] is not out of the question," the official said. "But to say that you would support that is not to say that you would expect that to be your standard operating procedure. Seldom is one individual's information decisive. And therefore it wouldn't merit anything like that scale."

If Congress rebuffs the proposal, the administration probably would request an increase in the total reward fund, the official said.