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OFFICERS OF C.I.A. NOW SAID TO TELL OF TIE TO CONTRAS

Admissions Would Contradict Denials That Agency Broke Laws on Aiding Rebels

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 23 — Some Central Intelligence Agency officers have recanted previous statements and are telling the agency's investigators about contacts with the contras and their private supporters that may have been improper, according to Reagan Administration officials.

The statements, by several field officers who worked in Central America, are the strongest evidence to date to contradict the agency's repeated assurances that none of its employees violated Congressional restrictions on helping the Nicaraguan rebels.

Among those who revised their earlier denials of any connection to the contra aid network were two C.I.A. operatives who worked in Honduras, the officials said.

Casey's Role Unclear

It is not clear what actions may be taken against the officials involved. The possible consequences include reprimands and other disciplinary action, including dismissal.

In three weeks of Congressional hearings on the Iran-contra case, key witnesses have also said they believe that William J. Casey, the former Director of Central Intelligence, was aware of and supported the White House-directed program to aid the contras. The full extent of the role played by Mr. Casey, who died this month, remains unclear.

Lawrence E. Walsh, the special counsel, is looking into the circumstances under which another intelligence body, the National Security Agency, provided sensitive coding machines that were later used by private citizens involved in the contra airlift who did not hold Government security clearances.

No C.I.A. Link Beyond Casey

Members of Congress said their investigators were trying to determine whether the dealings with the contras by four or five C.I.A. field officers under scrutiny were approved by their supervisors, or whether they were part of a broader effort by Mr. Casey and other senior agency officials to get around the laws.

Senator David L. Boren, Democrat of Oklahoma, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said no evidence had emerged suggesting that the highest levels of the C.I.A. other than Mr. Casey were involved in any plan to circumvent the laws on contra aid. "So far, we just have not been able to find anything that shows systematic, institutional involvement," he said in an interview.

Congressional testimony shows that C.I.A. officials helped make air drops to contra forces and worked as a liaison between private suppliers and contra troops in the field.

The C.I.A. officers linked so far, according to Government officials, include the C.I.A. chief of base in Tegucigalpa, Honduras; an officer in Aguacate, Honduras, and the station chief in Costa Rica, who used the pseudonym Tomas Castillo. All are still with the agency.

The C.I.A.'s support for the contra network appears to have been inconsistent. C.I.A. officials in Honduras and Costa Rica cooperated with the airlift, but the station chief in El Salvador refused, officials said.

Damage to C.I.A. Feared

The investigations have touched some of the Government's most sensitive intelligence agencies. One example is the National Security Agency, which collects electronic intelligence.

In the case of the coding machines, the director of the National Security

Agency, Lieut. Gen. William E. Odom, has acknowledged that his agency gave the classified devices to Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, the White House aide who was dismissed from the National Security Council after early disclosures of his role in the Iran-contra case.

According to Congressional officials, General Odom and his aides believed Colonel North would use the devices for counterterrorism activities, and were not aware they were instead distributed to people involved in the contra aid program who did not hold Government security clearances.

In testimony on May 5, Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord said Colonel North had given him and those working with him the sophisticated code machines. Several messages between General Secord and Colonel North that were written on the machines were submitted as evidence.

The intense focus on the C.I.A. by investigators has stirred concern among some officials that the Iran-contra affair could damage intelligence agencies whose confidence and capabilities have been only recently rebuilt.

Some officials recalled the aftermath of the investigations in the mid-1970's into assassinations and other agency misdeeds, when the C.I.A. backed away from any risky operation that could lead to public embarrassment. The officials expressed fears that the latest investigations could have the same effect.

Senators Boren and William S. Cohen, the Maine Republican who is deputy chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said those apprehensions were unfounded. Senator Cohen said he had seen no slackening in the C.I.A.'s boldness, and noted that the committee was in the process of favorably reviewing several new covert actions. He declined to describe them.

Different Explanations for Aid

Investigators for the Congressional committees that are now conducting hearings on the Iran-contra affair, and for Mr. Walsh, the independent counsel, are looking at several different explanations for the cooperation of intelligence officials with Colonel North's contra aid program.

The National Security Agency, for instance, provided Colonel North with 16 to 18 machines of a type known as the

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KL-43, used for transmitting messages in code. Each month, a mid-level official of the agency arranged for Colonel North to receive specially prepared code-key cards needed to operate the machines.

Government officials said it was unusual for that many machines to be checked out for an extended period. They said Colonel North also asked that some machines be prepared for distribution to foreigners, a request they called unusual.

None of this caused officials of the National Security Agency to question further Colonel North's statement that the machines were needed for some unspecified counterterrorism work, according to Congressional officials.

'No Follow-up'

"There were a lot of assumptions, and no follow-up," Senator Cohen said of the incident. "Everyone assumed that if they were requested by 'General' North it must have been cleared by the highest levels."

The participants felt the machines were essential to the aid network because they prevented eavesdropping by the Soviet Union and Cuba from a base in Cuba and made it difficult for the National Security Agency itself to overhear phone conversations.

A machine also went to the C.I.A. station chief in Costa Rica, Mr. Castillo, who used it to send messages outside the C.I.A.'s normal channels.

The National Security Agency is not to be confused with the National Security Council, which operates out of the White House and analyzes intelligence.

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