

U.S.-Salvadoran Ties Called Strained

By **STEPHEN ENGELBERG**

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 — Public disclosures about El Salvador's involvement in supplying arms to the Nicaraguan rebels have strained relations between the United States and the Salvadoran Government and jeopardized future efforts to aid the rebels, according to officials of both countries.

El Salvador is one of several countries in Central America that have been helping the rebels. American officials said that effort had been expected to continue as the Administration gears up to deliver \$100 million in military and nonlethal aid to the rebels.

But Salvadoran and American officials said El Salvador's help to the rebels was likely to be curtailed, at least temporarily. Several officials said, however, that El Salvador's heavy dependence on American economic and military aid would eventually force it to resume covert support of the contras.

The issue is significant because the contras, as the rebels are known, have depended on third countries such as El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras to provide bases, supply lines and air-

fields. Recently, Costa Rica has said it is unwilling to provide support, and the contras have relied largely on Honduras.

The extent of El Salvador's role in helping the rebels became public several weeks ago when a C-123 cargo plane was shot down over Nicaragua. Its surviving crew member, Eugene Hasenfus, was brought before reporters in Managua and said the flight was part of a major operation out of El Salvador's Ilopango air base. Mr. Hasenfus said a Cuban-American he knew as Max Gomez coordinated the effort.

After Mr. Gomez was reported to be linked to Vice President Bush's office, the Vice President's staff told reporters that Mr. Gomez worked for the Salvadoran Air Force on counterinsurgency matters.

El Salvador's President, José Napoleón Duarte, had previously said that he did not know of the operation at Ilopango or of Mr. Gomez. He has continued to deny any connection between the supply network and his Government. A senior Salvadoran official said that Mr. Bush's statements had put Mr. Duarte in an awkward position.

"Obviously, it's a credibility problem for Duarte, to say the least," an Administration official said. "He's saying one thing, we're saying another."

'They Up the Ante'

This official said that El Salvador would eventually resume its covert support, although it might demand more aid or concessions from the United States in return. "The usual thing in situations like this is they up the ante," this official said. He noted that El Salvador receives a great deal of American aid and would need even more to repair damage from recent earthquake.

"Salvador has got too much riding on this," the official said.

The issue of Salvadoran support for the Nicaraguan rebels is particularly sensitive because Mr. Duarte has been pushing hard for several years to end what he says is Nicaraguan support for rebels trying to topple his Government.

A high-ranking Salvadoran military official said recently: "It isn't convenient for our country to be helping the contras. We have already said our country is not intervening in the affairs of Nicaragua."

"Duarte will stop this," the official predicted.

An Administration official contended that the Congressional decision to resume aid to the contras would dispel

doubts among the Salvadorans. Reticence to support the contras, he said, was caused in part by uncertainty over whether the United States was really committed to supporting the Nicaraguan rebels. "Once the program gets rolling," he said, "I really doubt that this will be a lingering problem."

The publicized link between the supply operation and the Salvadoran military has encouraged some Salvadoran officials who oppose the aid to provide embarrassing information to news organizations. For example, Salvadoran officials gave United Press International the phone records of three of the "safe houses" used by the rebel supply network in El Salvador.

The records, U.P.I. said, showed telephone calls to the home and office of Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord, retired. General Secord has been described by some sources familiar with contra activities as an intermediary between American Government officials and the contras.

Elliott Abrams, the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs, would not comment on allegations of third-country involvement. But he said generally in a recent interview that Nicaraguan accusations against El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica had embarrassed those countries.

Mr. Hasenfus, the surviving crew member of the downed cargo plane, has said he believed Mr. Gomez was working for the Central Intelligence Agency. American officials have emphatically denied this charge, and members of the House and Senate intelligence committees have said they are satisfied with that assertion.

Mr. Hasenfus went on trial today in Nicaragua, and the proceedings were immediately assailed by senior American spokesmen.

"The so-called People's Tribunal is nothing more than a show trial, Soviet-style, and the conviction rates of these tribunals has been virtually 100 percent," Larry Speakes, the chief White House spokesman, said.

Mr. Speakes said American Embassy officials had been allowed only brief access to Mr. Hasenfus.

In a news conference and a television interview broadcast Sunday night, Mr. Hasenfus contended that he believed he was working for the C.I.A.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz, appearing on the NBC News program "Today," denied that charge and said, "Don't forget that this man is under arrest and is saying things under those conditions."