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'Contra' safe houses in Salvador linked to U.S. firms

By Mark Fazlollah
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SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador — Americans aiding the Nicaraguan "contras" ran several San Salvador safe houses, which were in regular contact with a CIA-founded company and the firm of a former Pentagon official, Salvadoran documents show.

A review of Salvadoran government files establishes that thousands of dollars in telephone calls were made from three safe houses to the United States, mainly to the Miami or Washington areas. The contras appeared to have abandoned all three safe houses during the past month.

It could not be determined whether the safe houses were in contact with U.S. government officials. But the records showed that there were telephone calls between the contras' houses and homes or offices of former ranking U.S. military men. It had been illegal for the past two years for U.S. officials to aid the contras with weapons shipments, though the restriction was removed by Congress last week.

One of the contras' homes in San Salvador's posh Escalon neighborhood was identified by Eugene Hasenfus, who was captured Oct. 5 when the cargo plane he was on was shot down in Nicaragua.

The Salvadoran records, provided by state workers who oppose the contras' presence in El Salvador, showed that Mr. Hasenfus' home in Marinette, Wis., was in telephone contact with the Escalon house several times last summer. A lawyer for the owner of the Escalon home said he believed the property was rented to a Cuban-American, but he declined to identify the tenant.

Occupants of the white colonial-style building telephoned the Miami-based Southern Air Transport Co. almost every day. During a two-month period last summer, the Escalon house made more than 60 calls to Southern Air, files show.

Southern Air was founded by the CIA. The agency sold it in the 1970s, and it now runs international charter operations with 24 airplanes.

Contra officer Mario Calero, who has been overseeing the contras' supply shipments from the United States to Central America, said

Southern Air Transport has flown "many flights for us."

Mr. Calero, whose brother Adolfo is the political chief of the largest contra force, stressed in a telephone interview that he was responsible only for shipments of non-lethal materials, such as food and clothing. He said he did not know whether Southern Air had been contracted for shipments of weapons. Southern Air's representative could not be reached for comment.

There were also regular telephone calls between the Escalon house and Stanford Technologies Corp. of Vienna, Va., the Salvadoran government files show.

Stanford Technologies was founded by Edwin Wilson, a renegade CIA agent who is serving a sentence in a federal penitentiary for selling weapons to Libya.

One of the Stanford executives is retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, who was chief of the Pentagon's Middle East arms sales and has been identified in news reports as having persuaded the Saudi Arabians to give the contras the plane Mr. Hasenfus was shot down in.

General Secord has denied that he was involved in the airplane deal or that he knew of any safe houses in San Salvador.

Another contra house was also in an exclusive neighborhood, perched on the base of an inactive volcano that majestically towers over San Salvador.

The landlord said he rented the property to Cuban-American Ramon Medina, who Mr. Hasenfus identified as one of the commanders of the contras' supply operations that flew out of San Salvador's Ilopango military airport. The landlord, who asked to remain anonymous, said Medina moved into the house about six months ago and "he always paid cash."

Nicaraguan security agents have said Medina's real name is Luis Posada Carriles, who last year escaped from jail in Venezuela. He was accused of planting a terrorist bomb that killed 73 people in a Cuban airliner in 1976.

The CIA has stated that Medina previously worked for the agency but was no longer on the payroll.

A third contra house in San Salvador is a modest bungalow in a residential neighborhood. The owner

said she rented the property to a Latin named "Manuel Gonzalez," who carried a U.S. passport.

Neighbors said three Americans and a Latin lived in the bungalow, and they erected a huge radio antenna last summer. They said the men left the bungalow in September, taking the antenna with them.

"When I saw the antenna, I thought they would have great television reception. But the next morning I could hear the tacka, tacka, tacka of a wireless," said a neighbor.

The neighbor said he believed one of the men's names was "Mr. Gomez."

Mr. Hasenfus has said Max Gomez and Medina commanded the contra operations in El Salvador.

Government records show telephone calls were made from the bungalow to Stanford Technologies and to Southern Air.

The CIA acknowledged that Mr. Gomez, who also used the names of Feliz Rodriguez and Gustavo Villado, worked for the agency in the past but no longer was employed by the American government.

The U.S. Embassy in San Salvador last week conceded that Mr. Gomez had lunch with Ambassador Edwin Corr, but the embassy did not release information about how the meeting was arranged or the details of the talks.

The Salvadoran armed forces has maintained that it did not have contact with Mr. Gomez, but news crews filmed the Salvadoran Air Force commander, Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, decorating Mr. Gomez at a ceremony in El Salvador several months ago.

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