

Reagan's plan to give small missiles to rebels sparks security concerns

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Last week, Sen. Dennis DeConcini started getting phone calls from top Reagan administration officials. They wanted to talk about Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

The Stinger is a lethal weapon, and the Arizona Democrat did not think the "contras" fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua should be allowed to have it. He had prepared an amendment to the contra-aid bill that would have prevented such a transfer.

But after a call from the President, among others, the amendment was quietly dropped.

As this incident shows, the shoulder-fired Stinger is now a weapon of controversy in Washington. Sending Stingers to insurgents symbolizes a level of United States support that makes some officials nervous — and that others applaud.

The administration has now decided to send Stingers to antigovernment forces in Angola and Afghanistan, according to widespread reports. This move has long been urged by factions within the Central Intelligence

Agency and Congress, which feel the capable Stingers are the only way to counterbalance Soviet-supplied helicopter gunships.

Stingers look like World War II-era bazookas that have grown up. Fired by one soldier, they can travel up to 3 miles cross-country and hit targets 4,500 feet off the ground. Their sensitive heat-seeking "eyes" can even spot aircraft from the front, when hot tailpipes are out of sight.

This is a top-of-the-line US weapon, and until now it has been available only to the trusted few. Besides NATO allies and other developed pro-US nations such as Japan, Stingers have been sold only to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, according to State Department officials.

There are "substantive questions of security" involved in sending Stingers to other countries that might want them, a State Department official says.

"We would not export stuff like that to El Salvador, for instance," says this official. The Salvadorean military is not exactly famous for tight discipline, and if Stingers fell into the hands of anti-government rebels, "they might shoot down President Duarte's helicopter."

Saudi Arabia, before it got its first batch of Stingers, had to agree to security procedures detailed by the US. According to documents outlining the agreement, the

Saudis must store the Stinger's two main parts — launcher and missile — in two separate areas.

Each area must have a full-time guard force and be surrounded by a fence a minimum of 6 feet high. Storage buildings must have steel vault doors, each secured by two padlocks. US personnel will inspect security arrangements annually, according to the documents. All maintenance of Stinger internal systems must be done under US control.

If Reagan officials have really decided to send Stingers to the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and Jonas Savimbi's anti-communist rebels in Angola, then they

must have changed their minds about the missile's sensitivity, congressional critics say. "Do we seriously think there are safeguards like the Saudis have in the mountains of Afghanistan?" asks one Senate aide.

A large percentage of arms sent to the Afghan rebels end up on the black market in Peshawar, Pakistan. The rebels themselves sometimes provide the wares to raise hard cash, according to the aide.

Purloined Stingers would be "the ultimate terrorist weapons," another congressional aide says.

Easy to use, easy to hide, the missiles would enable terrorist groups to supplement airport terminal attacks with strikes at civilian planes in the air, this aide says.

In addition, he claims, their presence in rebel hands would strip away the last vestiges of secrecy about US aid in Angola and Afghanistan.

Other experts say the terrorist potential of Stingers is somewhat exaggerated. The Soviets' most advanced similar weapon, the SA-7B, is widely available in third-world nations, they point out.

When the Israelis occupied PLO headquarters in Beirut, they discovered "thousands" of SA-7Bs still in crates, says Robert Kupperman, a terrorism expert at

Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Though it can only spot a plane when it can see its hot exhaust, and though its batteries tend to go dead, the SA-7B could shoot down a civilian airliner, Mr. Kupperman says. It probably couldn't shoot down a jet fighter, as Stingers could — "but terrorists aren't too interested in F-15s," he says.

The Stinger issue may yet be explicitly debated in Congress. Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D) of Indiana, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, has called for open congressional discussion of aid to Angola and Afghanistan.

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Testing a Stinger missile at White Sands Missile Range, N.M.T. Stinger is a shoulder-fired air-defense weapon used by the US Army and Marines. When fired, it homes in on the heat from an aircraft's engines. Although the missile travels at more than 1,000 miles per hour, its effective range is about 3 miles. The Stinger's launcher includes a sensor to help sort out friendly from enemy aircraft. In forest or mountain areas, a soldier might have as little as 15 seconds to see a jet, aim, and fire — a serious limitation. Against helicopters, the missile should be much more effective. The primary defense against such heat-seeking missiles is hot flares, which the target aircraft drops to divert the missile.

