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Stinger Missiles' Usefulness For Contras Is Questioned

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Special to The New York Times

MANAGUA, Nicaragua, April 3 — Diplomats and military officers said this week that they doubted whether the acquisition of advanced antiaircraft weapons by the Nicaraguan rebels would be sufficient to turn the tide of battle in their favor.

The Reagan Administration, which has decided to give surface-to-air Stinger missiles to the Afghan and Angolan rebels, is also known to be eager to send them to the rebels fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government.

Congress is considering an Administration request to provide \$100 million in military and nonmilitary aid to the rebels. Some Administration officials have said that if Congress approves the aid, as it is expected to do, antiaircraft weapons will be part of the military aid sent to the rebels, who are known as contras.

Sandinista Use of Air Power

Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said last month that under a compromise proposal offered to Congress, \$25 million of the \$100 million would be released immediately. He said most of this would go for nonmilitary purposes, such as food, but some would be used to provide the portable antiaircraft missiles and intensified military training.

The Stinger, which can be fired by an individual soldier, would be by far the most potent weapon in the rebel arsenal. According to experts, its automatic guidance system can deliver a high-explosive warhead to a target up to three miles away. The missiles are said to cost \$60,000 each.

During 1985, Sandinista forces scored major victories over rebel forces, in large measure because of their increasing use of air power. The Nicaraguan Air Force is believed to own more than 30 helicopters, including as many as 12 highly sophisticated MI-24's of Soviet manufacture.

"The contras say they are being badly chewed up by helicopters, that they are taking a lot of casualties that way," one foreign ambassador in Managua said today. "They think they need something to protect themselves."

Adolfo Calero Portocarrero, the most prominent rebel leader, said in an interview several weeks ago that he was seeking antiaircraft weapons for his troops.

"Our most important materiel need is defensive weapons to protect our fighters from Russian gunships piloted by Cubans," Mr. Calero said.

The United States has charged that Cubans are among those who fly the MI-24 helicopters.

'Make Operations More Equal'

A Latin American military officer said that providing Stinger missiles to the rebels "would remove some of the technological advantage the Sandinistas enjoy."

"This is not to say it would mean a shift in favor of the contras, but it would make operations more equal," the officer said. "Every time the Sandinistas operate in helicopters, they'll feel that extra psychological pressure."

The Nicaraguan Army has used helicopters to bomb and strafe enemy troop concentrations, which has made it difficult for the contras to move across open terrain. But the helicopters play other roles, that are perhaps even more important, in transporting troops transport and evacuating the wounded.

"There is nothing that supports the morale of an infantryman more than knowing that if you're wounded, there's a helicopter a few minutes away to bring you to the hospital," one diplomat said.

Countermeasures Expected

Military specialists in Managua said they expect the Sandinistas to take countermeasures if the Stinger system is delivered to the contras. They said the Sandinistas had already made some tactical adjustments since rebels began acquiring SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles, which are rudimentary compared to the Stinger. At least one Sandinista helicopter is believed to have been shot down by a contra firing a SAM-7.

"The Sandinistas are flying their helicopters lower, closer to the ground, so as to avoid being seen so easily," a diplomat who follows the military conflict said. "They are undoubtedly going to be modifying the copters, and in fact I would be very surprised if the Soviets haven't already begun a program to do that."

There is no indication, according to military officers and diplomats, that the Sandinistas are considering any substantial reduction in their air operations, which have proven quite successful.

Other Sandinista Advantages

In the past, commentators have cited the Sandinistas' air superiority as only one of several factors that have contributed to their military success. Others often mentioned are the overwhelming advantages the Sandinistas maintain in troop strength and armaments, the superiority of their basic training courses and their smoother, more unified command structure.

Responding to the introduction of antiaircraft weapons into the Nicaraguan conflict, and to the likelihood that Nicaraguan rebels will soon receive the Stinger system, Central American passenger airlines are beginning to avoid flying over the Nicaragua-Honduras border. Informed sources said Nicaraguan air controllers now regularly advise pilots to approach Managua from the Pacific Coast, so they will fly over territory where there is no rebel presence.

Because the Stinger is more modern than any other weapon the rebels have used before, there is some doubt that they will be able to learn to use it effectively.

"It may be too sophisticated for the people who are going to operate it," said a European diplomat. "It's for modern armies, not for the contras."

The Administration has not said how many Stinger missiles it intends to send to the contras, but diplomats said they doubted that more than 25 would be sent at first. They said rebels who have been using the SAM-7 would probably be given special courses in how to use the Stinger.

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Stinger and MI-24: Missile and Quarry

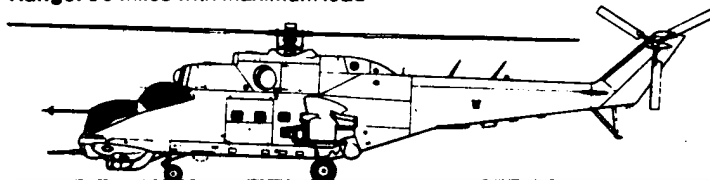
MI-24 Hind-D

Soviet-made armed assault helicopter able to transport eight fully-equipped soldiers.

Length: 68 feet 10 inches.

Maximum speed: 199 miles per hour

Range: 99 miles with maximum load



Stinger

U.S.-made shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, primarily meant to defend against aircraft flying at low altitudes.

Length: 5 feet

Weight: 34.5 pounds when loaded

Missile: 2.75 inches in diameter and guided to the target by heat-seeking infrared device



Sources: Jane's
All the World's Air-
craft, Jane's
Weapons Systems