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U.S. Is Said to Aid Contras Via Salvador

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SAN SALVADOR, Feb. 12 —United States assistance to Nicaraguan guerrillas has recently been channeled through El Salvador, according to American and Nicaraguan exile officials, apparently in an effort to make up for a recent cutoff of supplies by Honduras.

At least some of the aid has been flown from the military airport at Ilopango air base, just outside this capital, one source said. It was not clear whether approval for the flights has come only from the Salvadoran Air Force or also from the Government of President José Napoleón Duarte.

Officially, both Government and military officials continue to deny assisting the Nicaraguan anti-Government guerrillas, who are known locally as contras.

But the Government permitted the Central Intelligence Agency's air and sea attacks on Nicaragua to be launched from here in 1984, and supplies to Nicaraguan guerrillas were flown out of El Salvador on a regular basis in the same period, several rebel sources said.

Assistance from El Salvador now appears to have picked up again, because the Honduran Government has obstructed supply flights since October, using the issue to press the United States for better terms on economic and political issues.

Embarrassing Bad Luck

Although they have been secret, the rebel flights out of El Salvador have had a run of bad luck that has made them embarrassingly public. In the last two weeks, one plane laden with supplies for the guerrillas made a forced landing at a small rural airstrip and another plane, or part of a plane, crashed under unexplained circumstances.

In both cases, the Salvadoran military sealed off the area, recovered the planes and denied further knowledge of the affair. United States officials also evinced uncharacteristic ignorance of the incidents in a country where air traffic is monitored.

A highly reliable source with close contacts in the Government said that he was certain that at least one of the planes was carrying cargo for the Nicaraguan guerrillas and that he suspected the other was as well.

The least deniable incident occurred last week, when a plane made a forced landing 40 miles northeast of the capital at a small airstrip after having mechanical problems.

Salvadoran press reports identified the plane as a De Havilland registered in either Canada or the United States, the press here reported, under the number CGVGX C-7.

The plane's crew included a pilot and two passengers who did not speak Spanish, according to reporters who went to the scene. Local peasants said several bundles were thrown out of the plane before it landed. Salvadoran troops in helicopters combed the area to recover the unidentified gear, local residents said.

2 Mercenaries Cite Flights

Other reports of Nicaraguan rebel aid passing through El Salvador became public last year, when the Costa Rican police arrested five foreign soldiers of fortune in the camp of a Nicaraguan anti-Government guerrilla group on the Costa Rican border.

Two of those who were jailed — Steven P. Carr, who is an American, and Peter F. Glibbery, who is British — said in interviews that they had first flown to El Salvador on a rebel weapons flight from Miami that landed at Ilopango military airport last June.

The DC-3 cargo plane, with a Cuban-American pilot, was filled with guns and ammunition for the rebels, both men said. They were met by Salvadoran Air Force officers on landing, they added, and Salvadoran troops unloaded the cargo, carrying it to a warehouse. A smaller plane then ferried the weapons to rebel camps in Costa Rica, they said.

One of the pilots of the small plane's flights appeared to be a Salvadoran civilian, the two men said. The other pilot, they contended, identified himself as a member of the Salvadoran Air Force, the most independent and conservative branch of the Salvadoran armed forces.