

Elaborate System Supplies Contras

Downed Plane Was Part of Secret Network, U.S. and Rebel Officials Say

By DOYLE McMANUS, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—The American-manned cargo plane shot down in Nicaragua this week, far from representing a solo mission by free-lance adventurers, was part of an elaborate and secret *contra* supply system based in El Salvador and Honduras and financed by several governments as well as private donors, U.S. officials and Nicaraguan rebels said Wednesday.

The C-123 cargo plane was only one of at least 19 aircraft flying in support of the *contras'* guerrilla war against the leftist Sandinista regime, rebel officials said. It was part of a fleet of five such planes based at El Salvador's main air force base and carrying out regular supply runs with the approval of both the Salvadoran and U.S. governments, they asserted.

"We do not own the plane ourselves, but it is part of our air force," said a senior official of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest of several *contra* groups supported by the Reagan Administration.

Saudis Deny Reports

One *contra* official said that the five airplanes based at El Salvador's Ilopango air base had been bought with the help of donations from the government of Saudi Arabia. A second *contra* official said that Saudi Arabia had made donations to their cause but that he did not know whether it had helped buy aircraft. Both spoke on condition that they not be identified.

In Miami, a spokesman for the *contra* alliance, Leonardo Somarriba, said, "I don't deny or confirm that." But he added, "Obviously, something like this could not happen without the assistance of friendly governments."

The Saudi Embassy in Washington denied both reports.

U.S. officials said that there has

been evidence of aid to the *contras* from several Latin American countries, including El Salvador and Honduras, but that they could not comment on the allegations of Saudi involvement.

"I don't know who paid for this," Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams said. "I don't know who organized it."

President Reagan repeated his Administration's earlier denials of any CIA role in the supply flights, noting that Congress banned U.S. military aid to the *contras* in 1984. "There is no government connection with that at all," Reagan said during a campaign stop in North Carolina.

Bipartisan Attacks

"We've been aware that there are private groups and private citizens that have been trying to help the *contras*. . . but we did not know the exact particulars of what they're doing," the President said. "We're in a free country where private citizens have a great many freedoms."

In Congress, allegations that the Administration approved the supply runs triggered bipartisan criticism, although there was no indication that the incident would undermine support for a \$100-million aid package for the *contras* that Congress is expected to enact this week.

"It's totally wrongheaded," said Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger (R-Minn.) of the private *contra* supply operation. "If that is our policy, we don't need a State Department. We don't need a government. It's not the way I would bring peace to the hemisphere and get the Marxist-Leninists out of the hemisphere."

Durenberger said he had been informed that the airplane that crashed was equipped with a CIA-

supplied radio but had no other U.S. government equipment on board. Congress has allowed the CIA to provide the *contras* with sophisticated communications gear—and with U.S.-obtained military intelligence information about the Sandinistas—but with no other help.

The *contras*, who claim to have more than 10,000 guerrillas ranging inside Nicaragua from bases in Honduras and Costa Rica, have slowly developed their own air resupply system since 1984, when Congress forced the CIA to withdraw from their battle.

One branch of the *contra* air force is based at Aguacate, an airfield built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in southern Honduras. It includes at least 14 aircraft and is run directly by the Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

But the *contras'* most effective air supply operation, according to U.S. officials, is the one based at Ilopango and run under the command of Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, chief of staff of El Salvador's air force.

The CIA ran many of its supply missions for the *contras* before 1984 from Ilopango, officials said, and the Salvadorans moved in quietly to maintain the channel after the agency pulled out, one U.S. official said.

Contra officials confirmed that five cargo planes, including the one shot down Sunday, operate from Ilopango: two C-7 Caribous, one Maule short-takeoff and landing plane and two C-123s.

Eugene Hasenfus, the American crewman who survived the crash only to be captured by Sandinista troops, told reporters that the C-123 had taken off from Miami and stopped in El Salvador and Honduras before flying into southern Nicaragua. Hasenfus carried an identification card issued by the Salvadoran Air Force giving him access to the base at Ilopango and listing his rank as "adviser."

'Absolutely False'

El Salvador's government publicly denied any role in the contras' war, although some Salvadoran officials have privately acknowledged support for the rebels.

"This morning I met with the military high command," Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte said in a radio broadcast Wednesday, "and the information they gave me was that it was absolutely false" that the plane came from El Salvador. "These events are designed to create problems as the U.S. vote (on aid to Nicaraguan rebels) draws near."

Nicaraguan officials said they found a wallet in the wreckage of the plane that contained the business card of Philip J. Buechler, an official of the State Department office that administered \$27 million of non-weapons U.S. aid for the contras until the program expired on Oct. 1.

State Department officials acknowledged that Buechler may have dealt in the past with one of the crewmen on the plane. They said that did not indicate that the

United States had any direct role in the flight.

"Buechler's job included observing the loading of planes with humanitarian aid supplies," said one official. "So we're talking about the same group of pilots."

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the top-ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, accused the Administration of condoning the American-manned supply operation with a "wink" and a "shrug."

"If we ever get involved in a war in Nicaragua where Americans are dying," Leahy said, "that's how we'll do it. When people say that this is state-supported terrorism, they are not very far off."

House Democrats who have long opposed contra aid seemed resigned that the plane crash would not derail it.

Rep. David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), a leading opponent, said the Democrats hope to rescind approval of the aid next year when they expect to have a larger majority in the House. "I feel very certain that this is CIA-directed," said Bonior.

Durenberger, by contrast, said he believes the CIA's denials of involvement, even though the cargo in the plane included radio equipment that was "probably bought and paid for" by the United States government.

"I know it's not the CIA at work," he said, because the agency is aware that the plane was flying over an area equipped with anti-aircraft weapons.

Times staff writers Sara Fritz and Gaylord Shaw, in Washington, and William Long, in Miami, contributed to this story.