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CIA Station Chief Suspended for Part In Supplying Contras

Agent in Costa Rica Termed North's Conduit

By Robert Parry
Associated Press

The Central Intelligence Agency has suspended its station chief in Costa Rica after learning that he failed to disclose fully his participation in a secret network flying military supplies to the Nicaraguan contras, U.S. intelligence sources said yesterday.

The suspension of the station chief, who used the pseudonym Tomas Castillo, follows his recall earlier this month and two CIA investigations that cleared him of illegal actions.

The sources, who spoke on the condition they remain anonymous, said Castillo was suspended within the past few days when CIA officials were notified, apparently by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, that documents belonging to fired White House aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North showed Castillo more deeply involved in the resupply network than he had admitted.

The development suggests that during a two-year congressional ban on U.S. military aid to the contras, the CIA assisted North in managing a contra air resupply mission based at El Salvador's Ilopango military airfield.

One source said Castillo claimed he had the "tacit approval" of Clair E. George, the CIA's deputy director for clandestine activities, in acting as a channel for North's messages to the aid network.

CIA spokesmen were not immediately available for comment, but they have repeatedly denied that the spy agency violated the ban.

Earlier this month, Castillo was cleared by the internal investigations, which concluded he had passed along messages between North and the supply network on an occasional, informal basis, the sources said.

But after the investigations were completed, evidence from North's White House documents showed that North considered Castillo his "primary formal channel of communications" to the arms resupply operation, said one source.

Another source said Castillo was confronted with the new evidence last week and "admitted he had lied" about the extent of his participation in North's activities.

North, a Marine lieutenant colonel and an aide on President Reagan's National Security Council, was fired Nov. 25 after the Justice Department found that he had diverted profits from Iranian arms sales to assist the contras.

Under the suspension, Castillo will continue to be paid but will be given no assignments and could face disciplinary action once the new evidence is evaluated, one source said.

Castillo, in 1984, was one of several CIA officials reprimanded in connection with the publication of a psychological operations manual that counseled the contras on "the selective use of violence" to "neutralize" Nicaraguan officials.

Despite the reprimand, he was promoted to station chief in Costa Rica, where the contras were trying to organize a "southern front" in their war against Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

One source said it was inconceivable that North could have used Castillo as a conduit for messages to the rebel resupply operation without the knowledge of his CIA superiors.

But another source said North's contact with Castillo was generally by phone and thus bypassed normal CIA channels.

The source, however, said George, one of the agency's top officials, was in regular contact with North and knew about many of his activities. "George was [North's] primary point of contact" at the agency, talking to North once or twice a day, the source said.

The two investigations earlier this month that cleared Castillo were carried out by the CIA's inspector general and the president's Intelligence Oversight Board.

The sources said the inquiries found that Castillo had passed on messages for North on seven occasions. The internal investigations concluded that Castillo violated no law but may have used poor judgment.

From 1981 to 1984, the CIA covertly trained and supplied contra forces. Castillo was a principal aide to Duane Clarridge, the CIA officer in charge of organizing the rebels into an effective force, sources said.

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