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SENATE INTELLIGENCE CHIEF URGES REGIONAL ACTION AGAINST NICARAGUA
BY Robert Parry
WASHINGTON

The Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, declaring covert U.S. aid to Nicaraguan rebels "at a dead end," Tuesday urged regional action against Nicaragua's leftist government, possibly including military force.

Sen. David Durenberger, R-Minn., said the Reagan administration should drop its bid for \$14 million in renewed covert aid and instead encourage its Central American allies to seek action against Nicaragua by the Organization of American States.

Asked if such a move would lead ultimately to direct U.S. military intervention, Durenberger answered in a question-and-answer session at the National Press Club: "I don't think it's inevitable, but we better make clear that it is possible."

Earlier, in a speech at the club, he said, "Military action should never be ruled out. But no such action can be undertaken without a clear consensus in this country and in the region."

Durenberger, who heads one of two congressional committees that has overseen the CIA's covert action against Nicaragua, specifically cited two articles of the OAS' Rio Treaty which provides for collective self-defense, from diplomatic and economic steps to use of military force.

Durenberger criticized the administration for failing to develop a coherent approach toward Nicaragua, and Congress for interfering with the president's direction of foreign policy.

He said last year's congressional action, which requires approval by both houses of Congress for the release of \$14 million to the Nicaraguan rebels, "holds American action hostage to an ill-timed vote on an ill-planned program in support of a policy which no one understands."

As for President Reagan's call for resumption of the aid, Durenberger said: "The previous formula for covert assistance is simply at a dead end. ...

Congress won't be party to the illogical and illegal absurdity of pretending that we are not providing military assistance when it is widely and publicly known that we are."

However, Durenberger also denounced the Sandinista government, describing it as "another Central American dictatorship which is doomed to failure unless it can be kept alive by outside help."

He added that he considered intelligence evidence of Nicaraguan support for insurgencies in other Central American countries "clear and convincing," although he refused to elaborate on that information.

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The administration has long accused the Sandinistas of funneling weapons and other support to leftist guerrillas fighting in El Salvador and Guatemala, but has failed to capture a single weapons shipment in more than four years.

In December 1981, Reagan approved covert CIA aid to the rebels fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government. That assistance totaled about \$80 million when Congress cut it off last June, following disclosures that the CIA directed the mining of Nicaragua's harbors.

If the Central American nations were to accuse Nicaragua of aggression because of its alleged support of guerrillas, the OAS council could approve a variety of joint diplomatic and economic steps that would isolate Nicaragua from the region.

The Rio Treaty also grants the council the authority to order "the use of armed force" to thwart aggression.

In the past, however, the OAS has resisted suggestions that it intervene in the Central America dispute as long as the so-called Contadora peace process, led by Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela, continued.

Administration officials have also expressed doubts about chances of enlisting OAS backing for a joint effort against Nicaragua, considering the internal political problems such a move could cause countries throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Durenberger, however, argued that the OAS route represented the best hope to pressure on the Sandinistas into opening up its political process and cutting its ties to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

"If the Sandinistas adjust their policies ... and manifest a commitment to the democratic process, we should be willing to develop close and supportive ties with Nicaragua," he said. "But we should also be prepared to isolate Nicaragua if the Sandinistas continue on a collision course with their neighbors."

In his speech, Durenberger also compared the construction of an advanced airport in Nicaragua to one that was being built on Grenada in October 1983, when the United States and other Caribbean nations invaded the island nation after charging its leftist government threatened regional security.

Citing Nicaragua's airport construction at Puenta Huete, Durenberger said: "Is that a Grenada or not a Grenada?"