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HH PAGE A7

White House Seeks New Contra-Aid Strategy

Senior Reagan Officials See Need for Fresh Initiative to Win Congressional Approval

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The Reagan administration is seeking a new strategy to win congressional approval for further aid to the Nicaraguan rebels in the aftermath of the Iran-contra affair, senior officials said yesterday.

President Reagan has requested \$105 million in aid for the contras for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1, but the consensus among top White House officials is that the contra program remains in jeopardy in Congress.

No final decision has been reached on a specific revised plan, but a senior White House official said yesterday there will be "new initiatives" on contra aid. The official predicted that any new strategy is likely to attempt to focus the debate away from military objectives and toward diplomatic efforts aimed at persuading Nicaragua's Sandinista government to allow free elections and a free press.

Some contra supporters within the administration are advancing a proposal under which Reagan would ask Congress to extend contra aid in the fall for 18 months, through the 1988 presidential elections, administration officials said.

Under this proposal, which has not been formally considered by top White House aides, Congress would vote on an enlarged contra aid package this fall, and it would not have to take up the issue again until after a new president takes office in January 1989.

Proponents of this plan argue that it would be in the interest of both political parties not to take up the controversial issue of contra aid in the middle of a presidential election campaign.

"If we have to vote again weeks before the election, that seems to me not to be sensible," said one official, who asked not to be identified.

Officials said that if this plan is approved by the White House, Reagan will then ask Congress this fall

to approve an amount significantly higher than the \$105 million now being sought and those funds would cover the entire 18-month period.

However, one White House official familiar with this plan said yesterday that it is "not realistic."

"It ain't going to happen," he said.

An aide to House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) said yesterday that since Wright does not expect Reagan's current aid request to be approved, "we certainly do not anticipate approval of a greater amount for a longer period of time."

The House voted last month to block a final \$40 million installment of the \$100 million in contra aid approved for this year, but the funds were released when the Senate refused by a narrow margin to hold them up. Several senators who opposed an immediate aid cutoff warned, however, that they may not back Reagan's \$105 million request unless the administration focuses more on diplomatic peace initiatives in Central America.

Some House Republicans and administration officials have argued that despite the fallout from the Iran-contra affair, which is likely to grow in the wake of congressional hearings on the subject this summer, Congress will be reluctant to cut off all aid.

"There's never going to be meaningful negotiations without the pressure of the contras," said Rep. Dick Cheney (R-Wyo.), a contra supporter and the ranking Republican on the House select committee investigating the Iran-contra affair.

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, the administration's point man on the contra program, said yesterday that he thinks that Congress will distinguish between revelations surrounding the Iran-contra affair and the "serious national-security issue" posed by the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

"Regardless of what happens during the hearings, that issue remains," Abrams said.

Abrams said the administration is

studying how much the contras will need over the next year or two and does not regard the \$105 million as a final request. "From our preliminary evidence, their needs will be higher than that, but we do not have a final figure yet," Abrams said. "I suspect we will ask for more than that certainly."

Abrams, whose role in managing the contra program over the last two years is under scrutiny on Capitol Hill, said he is confident that he has done nothing wrong and that he will continue in his job after the investigations are over.

He said he has retained a Washington lawyer, W. DeVier Pierson, to represent him on Iran-contra matters. Abrams said he hired a lawyer because he does not have time to keep track of all the affair's developments, adding, "I am a lawyer, and I think everybody should have a lawyer."

Abrams said he has talked to officials on the select congressional committees but that he has had no contact with independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, who is conducting a separate criminal investigation of the Iran-contra affair.

"I am very happy to talk to [Walsh's staff]," Abrams said. "I think it would be odd if they never talked to me. I'm sure they will."