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Panels Vote Immunity for Businessman In Iran Probe; Role of NSA Is Examined

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WASHINGTON — House and Senate committees investigating the Iran-Contra affair voted to grant limited immunity to businessman Albert Hakim in an apparent effort to compel him to give the lawmakers access to financial records involved in the scandal.

Mr. Hakim, a close associate of retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, would be the fourth and most important figure yet to be granted immunity. He is believed to have intimate knowledge of the financial arrangements used to carry out both the U.S. weapon sales to Iran and arms shipments to the Contras.

Meanwhile, it was learned that congressional investigators are looking into the role of the National Security Agency—the supersecret intelligence organization that intercepts radio, telephone, telex and other messages—in the administration's Iran and Contra operations. The agency gave Lt. Col. Oliver North, the fired White House aide, 15 encryption devices, which he used to provide secure communications for a network of U.S. officials and private arms dealers who were secretly arming Nicaraguan rebels.

Congressional investigators also are seeking to determine whether the NSA collected any evidence suggesting that money from arms sales to Iran was diverted to the rebels, who are known as Contras.

Under the "use immunity" that the congressional committees voted to grant, Mr. Hakim would be required to testify before Congress, and anything he discloses couldn't be used against him in any criminal prosecution. The independent counsel investigating the affair still could prosecute the businessman, as long as the prosecutor shows that any evidence he used wasn't derived from the congressional testimony. A Senate investigator said yesterday that as many as 12 people ultimately may be granted some immunity in order to secure their testimony.

Questions about the NSA open a new line of inquiry into the Iran-Contra affair. While the Central Intelligence Agency has come under considerable criticism for its role, the NSA hasn't been much scrutinized. The NSA isn't the same agency as the National Security Council, the arm of the

White House where Col. North worked.

Congressional sources said they haven't found any evidence of wrongdoing by the NSA, and they stressed that the agency, which is based at Fort Meade, Md., has been cooperating with investigators. A spokesman for the NSA declined to comment on the agency's role in the Iran-Contra affair.

Intelligence sources said the encryption devices, described as computer-type keyboards that are connected to ordinary telephone lines, aren't the most sophisticated such machines developed by the NSA.

The Tower Commission report on the Iran arms sales disclosed that in addition to Col. North, Gen. Secord, who managed the airlift of arms to the Contras, had one of the devices, as did the CIA station chief in Costa Rica, who helped coordinate air drops to the insurgents. Former CIA agent Thomas Clines, who oversaw arms shipments to the Contras from Portugal, also had one of the machines. Another was installed at the arms network's secret base at El Salvador's Ilopango air force base, according to sources.

The intelligence sources said it was unclear whether NSA director Lt. Gen. William Odom or other top NSA officials knew that some of the devices were given to private citizens or that they were used to help arm the Nicaraguan rebels. It also isn't clear whether they knew what provisions, if any, were made to safeguard the devices.

A former high-ranking intelligence official said the NSA should never have provided such equipment to a mid-level White House official without a written directive from the secretary of defense, who nominally supervises the NSA. But Tower Commission sources said they found no evidence that Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger directed the agency to provide the devices, or that the NSA had requested his permission to do so.

Senate investigators also are trying to determine whether the NSA intercepted or was given any messages that might have disclosed either the existence of the possibly illegal Contra arms network or any diversion of Iran arms sales money to the Contras. The NSA is obligated under the law to report any evidence that a crime may have been committed.