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GATES

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WASHINGTON

A Acting CIA Director Robert Gates told Congress last week that one of his agents lied in telling investigators the agent and Lt. Col. Oliver North had no role in directing arms to Nicaraguan rebels last year, sources say.

A The agent, the CIA's station chief in Costa Rica known by the pseudonym Tomas Castillo, is the focus of an internal probe reopened by Gates after questions arose about the operative's candor, the sources said Tuesday. Last week it was disclosed Castillo was recalled to Washington and would be retired early.

Castillo worked closely with North, the former National Security Council aide fired for his role in the Iran arms-Contra aid scandal, in coordinating four shipments of 500,000 rounds of ammunition from a private aid network to rebels in southern Nicaragua in April 1986, congressional and rebel sources report.

In that light, Gates told congressional investigators last week that Castillo "lied on the first inspector general report when he said he had no involvement in giving arms to the Contras," a source said.

The inspector general, the CIA's internal watchdog, began an investigation last fall of possible agency involvement in funneling aid to the Contras at a time when the agency was allowed to share intelligence with the rebels but all U.S. military assistance to them was banned by law.

Castillo responded to questions from the inspector general's office "very narrowly and with lack of candor," said one intelligence source.

"When the inspector general asked questions about his relationship with North, Castillo withheld information in a way that could be interpreted as misleading," the source said.

North was fired Nov. 25 when Attorney General Edwin Meese singled him out in revealing the scheme to divert money to the Contras through secret Swiss bank accounts from U.S. arms sales to Iran.

Congressional and administration sources report Castillo kept his supervisor and North fully apprised of his pro-Contra activities. This week, the sources said the CIA was taking disciplinary action against Castillo to insulate senior officials from the controversy.

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Government sources said Tuesday it remains unclear if Castillo violated any law but Gates has reopened the internal inquiry begun last fall to further explore the agent's role.

Questions about Castillo's veracity during the inquiry were prompted by FBI discovery of an electronic message from North in which he described his work with Castillo to coordinate arms shipments, an intelligence source said.

The FBI discovered the communication in a master computer disk at the NSC and forwarded it to the presidentially appointed Tower Commission now reviewing NSC operations as a result of the Iran-Contra scandal, the source said. The commission in turn, referred the message to the CIA.

Gates, nominated by President Reagan last week to succeed the hospitalized William Casey as CIA director, is scheduled for a Feb. 17 confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster would not say Tuesday where Castillo could be reached and added it was CIA policy not to discuss comments - such as Gates' reported remarks -- made in closed session.

Administration and congressional sources said they could not understand why Castillo did not tell internal investigators he worked with approval from his supervisor, the task force chief in Central America, in conveying information about Nicaraguan troop positions to the private Contra aid network. The data allowed cargo planes to pinpoint where and when to drop weapons to the rebels.

Castillo previously was disciplined in 1984 for his role in preparing a rebel manual that called for assassinating Nicaraguan government leaders. Casey did not punish two senior agency officials who planned and approved the manual, Rep. Norman Mineta, D-Calif., told United Press International last week.