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New missiles going to rebels as warning to Soviets

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WASHINGTON — In a symbolic show of muscle-flexing, the Reagan administration is upgrading its military support for anti-communist Afghan and Angolan rebels in what White House officials describe as a warning to the Soviet Union that it cannot hope to win Third World conflicts through force.

The administration notified the intelligence committees in Congress last week that it was sending the latest Stinger portable antiaircraft missiles for the first time to insurgents fighting Soviet-backed governments in the two countries.

Several hundred Stingers in the hands of the two rebel forces is not expected to swing the battle in their favor, but several White House officials

said the sophisticated weapons packed a potent political punch, if not a fearsome military one.

One official described the decision to send the missiles as a signal to the Soviet Union that regional conflicts like those in Afghanistan and Angola could be resolved only at the bargaining table, as President Reagan proposed in a speech at the United Nations last fall.

"We're putting our muscle where our mouth is," said the official. "This is part of the President's more assertive policy of aiding Third World freedom fighters. It's part of the so-called Reagan Doctrine," under which the administration has pledged to assist anti-communist insurgents anywhere in the world.

In an Oct. 24 address commemorating the 40th anniversary of the U.N., Reagan proposed that U.S. and Soviet officials work together in trying to bring about peace negotiations to end fighting between Soviet-supported regimes and U.S.-backed insurgents in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia and Nicaragua.

The Soviets, however, ignored Reagan's proposal, and the shipment of Stingers was a U.S. response to that silence, the White House said.

"We're telling the Soviets that there is not an easy way out of these conflicts," said an administration official. "Military options are not viable. So they had better come to the bargaining table."

The Soviets, who have an estimated 130,000 troops in Afghanistan, have accused the administration of trying to wage war in the Third World through proxy.

The shoulder-held, heat-seeking Stingers, which replace older and cruder Soviet-made SA-7 missiles, have a range of three miles, can reach an altitude of 4,500 feet and are effective against Soviet helicopter gunships and other aircraft.

Officially, the administration will not admit that it is shipping the new weapons, which are being supplied as a form of covert aid. However, White House officials have not been reluctant to admit privately to the shipments. Indeed, some even raised the subject on their own and discussed it with pride, underscoring their desire that the intended message get through to the Soviets.

Although administration officials agreed on the purpose of the decision to begin shipping more advanced weapons, there appeared to be some disagreement as to why it was being done now.

One senior U.S. official claimed that the Soviets had been building up their military forces in Afghanistan and Angola and the United States was now making its counterresponse. However, there has been no clear evidence of recent military buildups in either country.

This official also said he does not believe reports that the Soviets were on the verge of a negotiated withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and thus increased U.S. aid was essential.

"This is remarkable. It's amazing that we're doing this," said the official, who has been lobbying for upgraded aid to rebel forces for some time and was elated by the decision.

Another White House official said the only recent change precipitating the decision was that "the administration has come to a more focused view on the need to really support these groups. The Afghan rebels are fighting heavy odds and need to be bolstered."

A third official said the administration acted "to satisfy the right-wingers on the Hill, who have been clamoring for increased aid to the rebels."

He said Secretary of State George P. Shultz had met in early March with Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole (R., Kan.) and a group of conservative senators who had urged him to provide Stingers as soon as possible to the Afghan resistance movement and to Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, who personally lobbied for U.S. aid.