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WASHINGTON POST
5 December 1985

U.S. Eyes Unit to Foil Terrorists

Military Team Based In Europe Could Speed Response

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The Reagan administration is considering permanently basing an advance military team in Europe to speed the deployment of counterterrorist units such as the Army's Delta Force, which has had difficulties getting to the Mediterranean region in time for effective action against hijacked airliners, U.S. officials said yesterday.

Specialists on the European team would set up communications, gather current intelligence, rush detection and eavesdropping equipment to the scene and coordinate governmental efforts during a terrorist incident.

The team, which could be as small as one man and would not engage in combat, would swing into action while a larger assault force was flying toward the trouble spot, administration officials said.

The proposal is one of several measures reflecting both a stepped-up U.S. antiterrorist effort in a year of bloody air and sea piracy incidents, and concern that U.S. forces are unable to react quickly enough, even when the difficult decision has been made to counterpunch militarily.

For example, the Army and Air Force have undertaken a secret \$550 million program to buy helicopters designed to carry specialized assault units into action. The helicopters would be equipped to refuel at night without lights and to navigate by heat emitted from objects on the ground—all part of the effort to gain surprise in counterterrorist operations, sources said.

A new U.S. willingness, authorized by the White House, to take

military action against terrorists has meant that the North Carolina-based Delta Force has been dispatched several times this year in the wake of hijackings.

Interagency discussions about establishing a forward post in Europe for counterterrorist action preceded the hijacking Nov. 24 of an Egyptian airliner. But the matter has been made more urgent by the deaths of 60 people when Egyptian commandos stormed the plane and by the inability of the Delta to reach the scene because Maltese authorities refused to let the troops land in a military transport.

The idea of a forward base also gained momentum from earlier problems in getting the assault force to the Mediterranean quickly, with the hijackings of the Italian cruise ship Achillo Lauro in October and a TWA 727 in June cited as cases in point.

The Central Intelligence Agency, Defense Department, State Department and the White House have been involved in the discussions. The country where the advance team would be based has not been chosen, officials said, but Italy and West Germany are prime candidates, although an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean is also an outside possibility.

The permanent unit should be small, officials said, and considered an advance, noncombat element of Delta Force, which is based at Fort Bragg, N.C. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, according to administration officials, was initially wary of splitting off part of the military Special Forces to man an overseas office, but became more receptive because of recent difficulties in deploying the Delta force to hotspots 3,000 miles away.

The delays also have stirred concern in Congress. A House Armed Services subcommittee, for example, yesterday held a closed hearing on the kinds of aircraft and helicopters needed for so-called "special operations."

The Army, as part of a broad upgrading of antiterrorist capability, plans to spend about \$500 million through 1991 on MH60X Blackhawk and CH47 helicopters, which are based in Fort Campbell, Ky., and are called Task Force 160 Aviation Element.

The Air Force has earmarked \$50 million to buy 10 HH53H Pave-low helicopters equipped with night-vision devices, sources said. The Air Force would transport Delta troopers when more range was needed than the Army could provide. The special unit is based at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

The specialized helicopters, when folded up, can be flown to an overseas base inside a C5 transport. From there the helicopters can fly to the trouble spot.

The Delta team, which Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak reportedly requested to assist in the most recent hijacking, never got beyond Sigonella, Sicily, administration officials said, because of delays in obtaining landing permission from the Maltese government. During the Oct. 7 hijacking of the Achille Lauro, Delta Force flew from Fort Bragg to the Marine helicopter ship Guam, but never saw action, sources said.

The Delta force was dispatched toward Algiers when the TWA 727 was hijacked on June 14, but again saw no action.

Administration officials said Delta cannot brag about its successes publicly because its operations are considered highly secret. But they said a small Delta team on July 31, 1984, provided valuable assistance to a 12-man Venezuelan commando unit, which assaulted a hijacked Venezuelan DC9 jet on the Caribbean island of Curacao. The two hijackers were killed and the passengers and crew safely rescued.