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U.S. Officials Linked to Airlift of Contra Supplies

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SAN SALVADOR, Oct. 13 — American officials at least indirectly supported Nicaraguan rebel supply flights out of El Salvador, according to two sources here.

They also said a longtime Central Intelligence Agency employee identified by an American jailed in Nicaragua was involved in the operation.

The two sources have close knowledge of El Salvador and have contact both with C.I.A. agents and the men flying supplies to the Nicaraguan rebels from El Salvador. Both sources said they support American aid to the

rebels and chose to speak because they are angry about the "amateurishness" of operations to aid the rebels.

"If United States officials in Washington are saying the U.S. Government had nothing to do with this, they are wrong," said one source.

Both sources said the man named as a C.I.A. agent, who uses the nom de guerre Max Gómez, is a Cuban-American veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and has a long history of C.I.A. work, but is probably no longer directly employed by the agency.

They added, however, that Mr. Gómez, whose real name, they said, is Félix Rodríguez, keeps in close touch with the C.I.A. and carries out C.I.A.

projects here. They said his work may be indirectly financed by the C.I.A. through private Cuban-American groups in Miami.

Eugene Hasenfus, an American who worked for the C.I.A. in Asia and who was shot down last week over Nicaragua on a flight to supply rebels there, told reporters in Managua that he was supervised by two C.I.A. agents in El Salvador named Max Gómez and Ramón Medina.

The two sources here described Mr. Gómez as a hardened but charismatic veteran of clandestine wars who wears Che Guevara's wristwatch and carries

the revolutionary's photo in his wallet. They said Mr. Gómez interrogated Mr. Guevara for American intelligence services shortly before the Argentine-born colleague of Fidel Castro was killed by the army in Bolivia in the late 1960's.

Besides aiding the Nicaraguan rebels, Mr. Gómez, as he is called by all who know him here, has concentrated on directing C.I.A. projects for the Salvadoran Air Force. He is an expert on helicopter tactics and has created rapid-reaction helicopter squads that have badly bloodied the leftist guerrillas here, the sources said.

"He is one of the heroes of this war," said one of the sources who has spent time with Mr. Gómez. "He has probably done more than anyone to improve the military and hurt the guerrillas."

One of the sources, who has proved highly reliable in the past, said another man named as a C.I.A. agent by the American imprisoned in Nicaragua, was also involved in rebel supply flights in El Salvador and probably does work for the C.I.A. The second source could not confirm this, however.

The Nicaraguan rebel supply operation has been based at Ilopango, the main military airbase outside San Salvador, the capital, for almost three years, according to four different sources here, including two American officials. The Central Intelligence Agency set up the operations when it was still legal to do so, the sources said.

One source with knowledge of current supply operations and who has intimate ties with the top echelons of the military here, said the Salvadoran Army high command is tired of taking responsibility for a clandestine effort that it supported because American officials asked it to do so.

'Salvadorans Are Furious'

"Do you think the Salvadoran Government would let hundreds of guns and big airplanes fly in and out of here for more than a year taking stuff to the guerrillas if the U.S. government didn't tell them to?" the source asked. "The Salvadorans are furious for having to take the rap on this."

The two sources who spoke in El Salvador said they did not have sufficient information to spell out the exact details of official American support for the Nicaraguan rebel supply effort. But they both said it existed and they described a large operation that appears to have been designed to remain narrowly within the technical limits of Congressional restrictions on C.I.A. involvement with the guerrillas.

In practice, however, C.I.A. agents may have violated the restrictions, according to accounts provided by the two sources. While an effort was made to maintain "deniability" of C.I.A. involvement in the supply operation, C.I.A. agents in El Salvador and, possibly, other American officials based in Washington, helped organize, occasionally monitor and perhaps even finance, the rebel supply effort, one source said. They also asked the Salvadoran Air Force to permit it to continue, the source added.

"The C.I.A. may not have run this day-to-day, but agency people are out with the Salvadoran Air Force all the time and I can tell you they had a hand in this," said the source who has close contacts with the Air Force and the C.I.A.

Private Contractors Used

But only non-C.I.A. personnel were used to carry out the actual supply work and private companies were hired on contract to provide supplies and airplanes, the two sources said.

All the air cargo companies and personnel so far identified as participating in rebel supply operations out of El Salvador have a long history of past work for the C.I.A. They seem to have been hired on contract to work in what is legally a private capacity, the two sources said, although American officials encouraged their efforts.

They added that Administration officials had misled news organizations in an attempt to cover rebel operations here by saying they were carried out by a private group led by a retired American officer, Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub. They said General Singlaub was not responsible for running the operation here.

"This never would have happened like this if the Agency knew what it was doing and if Congress hadn't stopped the Agency from supporting the freedom fighters against a Marxist dictatorship in Nicaragua that is backed by Russia, Cuba and East Germany," said one source bitterly, describing management of the Nicaraguan rebels as "a mess."

Vice President Bush said Saturday that he had met Mr. Gómez three times and described him as a "patriot" who is an adviser to the Salvadoran Government's counterinsurgency effort.