

Salvadoran General Contradicts Bush, Denies U.S. Civilians Aid War on Rebels

By DAN WILLIAMS, *Times Staff Writer*

SAN SALVADOR—Contradicting a statement made by Vice President George Bush, El Salvador's military chief of staff said Monday that no American citizens nor other foreigners except authorized American military advisers have been working with the Salvadoran armed forces in the fight against leftist guerrillas.

"No one could hire a civilian as an adviser," said Gen. Adolfo Blandon, the nation's top military staff officer. "It would have to be authorized not only by us (the armed forces) but by the government" of President Jose Napoleon Duarte.

Bush said Sunday that a Cuban-American he identified as Felix Gomez was helping "the government of El Salvador put down . . . a Marxist-led revolution." Gomez's real name is reported to be Felix Rodriguez, and he has also been identified by the name Max Gomez.

Air Crew Survivor

Last week, Eugene Hasenfus, sole survivor among the crew of a C-123 transport plane shot down by Sandinista troops in neighboring Nicaragua, said that Max Gomez was a CIA employee who directed an undercover operation through El Salvador's Ilopango Military Air Base to supply arms to the *contras*, the U.S.-backed guerrillas fighting the Sandinistas.

Bush's remarks and those of officials here and of Hasenfus raised questions about just what Rodriguez/Gomez—who in the past has worked for the CIA—was doing in El Salvador and for whom.

A spokesman for Bush said that Donald Gregg, one of the vice president's aides, recommended Rodriguez to the Salvadoran air force to serve as a military adviser.

Publicly, Salvadoran officials denied that Rodriguez held any kind of position with the Salvadoran armed forces, but they would say little else. Privately, some Salvadoran military officers said that Rodriguez was part of program that began last spring to help the *contras*.

Contras Told

"He (Rodriguez) didn't have anything to do with us (El Salvador's armed forces)," one military officer said. "He was mixed up with the *contras*."

None of the Salvadorans interviewed on the subject linked the *contras* supply operation with the U.S. government, but they pointed out that U.S. military advisers and American Embassy officials have access to Ilopango air base and could hardly have been unaware of the activity.

One Salvadoran officer said that Rodriguez was one of "several" Cuban-Americans who worked at Ilopango, arranging flights of arms to the *contras*. They have operated up to three flights a week from Ilopango since last spring, he added.

Another military source said that an unspecified number of Nicaraguan exiles also were involved in the *contras* supply operations at Ilopango. These Nicaraguans, he said, were once members of the Nicaraguan air force under dictator Anastasio Somoza, who was overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979.

The Nicaraguans were welcomed at Ilopango because they had formed friendships with Salvadoran air force officers before Somoza's fall, the source said.

Previously, the source added, the Salvadoran air force had let Nicaraguan rebels commanded by former Sandinista guerrilla leader Eden Pastora use Ilopango as a supply base. That program ended, he said, after CIA aid to Pastora's rebels was cut off in 1984.

The Times has reported that Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo, head of the Salvadoran air force, let the *contras* supply operation use the Ilopango base. One Salvadoran officer said that an assortment of military irregulars operate routinely out of Ilopango.

"The people are among a group of free-lancers, some *contras*, some soldiers of fortune, some arms vendors, whom Bustillo lets work out there," he said.

Col. Mauricio Hernandez,

spokesman for the Salvadoran armed forces, said: "I don't know anything about this. But you know how the air force is here. They keep the doors closed tight."

Bustillo could not be reached for comment.

Political sensitivities apparently keep the Salvadorans from openly acknowledging their role in any *contras* supply effort. Officially, the government upholds a policy of not interfering in the affairs of Nicaragua, separated from El Salvador by the 25-mile-wide Gulf of Fonseca.

Unofficially, however, military officials express hostility to the Sandinistas because of their support, including reportedly supplying arms, to the Marxist-led guerrillas fighting the Salvadoran government.

"The solution to our problems," said one official, "is to get rid of the Sandinistas."

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