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CIA official said to reveal killings by 'contras'

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WASHINGTON — A high-ranking CIA official told congressional staff members that CIA-supported *contras* killed many middle- and lower-level government officials and civilians in Nicaragua, according to congressional sources with access to classified information.

The disclosure of the killings was made during a secret briefing late last year for senior staff members of the House intelligence committee.

Those killed included "civilians and Sandinista officials in the provinces, as well as heads of cooperatives, nurses, doctors and judges," according to a source familiar with the briefing.

The CIA official, Dewey Claridge, former head of the CIA's clandestine operations in Latin America, insisted that such killings did not violate a 1981 executive order signed by President Reagan forbidding political assassinations.

"After all, this is a war — a paramilitary operation," Claridge was quoted as saying by one person who was present. The account of the briefing was confirmed by two other sources.

When asked for comment on the Claridge briefing, a CIA spokesman said the agency would have none.

Disclosure of the briefing added fuel to a growing controversy over a CIA manual given to the *contras* that provides detailed instructions on techniques for assassination, blackmail and kidnapping.

The manual was prepared last year, when Claridge was handling clandestine Latin American operations. Claridge has since been assigned to another high CIA position, but the agency would not disclose his new title.

Reagan has ordered two investigations into whether the CIA acted improperly in preparing the manual, whose existence was disclosed earlier this week by the Associated Press. One investigation is to be made by the CIA itself, the other by the President's Intelligence Oversight Board.

Reagan's Democratic opponent in the coming election, Walter F. Mondale, described the manual yesterday as "dirty work" and demanded the resignation of CIA Director William J. Casey. Mondale contended that Casey had failed to enforce laws that prohibit government agencies from participating in assassinations.

In his briefing, one source said, Claridge told the committee staff members "that there were no rules, no restrictions and no restraints at all on what the *contras* did inside Nicaragua." The *contras*, or counterrevolutionaries, are fighting to oust the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

Claridge said that the term *assassination*, by the CIA's definition, did not apply to killings in Nicaragua.

He said that "these events don't constitute assassinations because as far as we are concerned assassinations are only those of heads of state," the source quoted Claridge as saying. "I leave definitions to the politicians."

The wording of Reagan's order, signed Dec. 4, 1981, did not appear to restrict the ban on assassinations to high-level officials but seemed to be a blanket ban.

In part, it said: "No person employed by or acting on behalf of the U.S. government shall engage in or conspire to engage in assassinations."

An underlying question in a burgeoning series of investigations, some by the administration and others by Congress, clearly will be whether Reagan's massive buildup of CIA covert operations has gotten out of control.

The White House said Thursday that Reagan knew nothing of the manual until he read about it in the newspapers, and White House officials suggested that it was the work of "an overzealous free lance," a low-level independent employee working under CIA contract.

One congressional source with access to classified information, however, described the White House explanation as "just B.S."

"The standard CIA practice is to contract out a lot of publications and manuals for covert actions because no one at Langley [CIA headquarters in Virginia] sits at an IBM terminal writing manuals for guerrillas," the source said.

Several former well-placed government officials said they found it hard to believe that high government officials could be unaware of policies endorsed in such a document.

Asked whether the President was concerned that he might not have been briefed about "what was going on," White House spokesman Larry Speakes advised reporters to await the results of investigations before drawing conclusions.

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The congressional source who described the Claridge briefing said, "I believe the White House when they say Reagan didn't know about the manual. ... But I'm sure that other people, high-level people ... certainly knew about it probably because they approved it. They must have known."

House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. (D., Mass.) on Thursday called for Casey's resignation soon after hearing of the manual. He asserted that the kind of internal investigation ordered by the White House was bound to be a "whitewash."

The draft of the manual disclosed by the Associated Press, 44 pages in its English translation, advises the anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua to execute selected government officials publicly, arrange the shooting deaths of fellow members so as to create "martyrs," and blackmail ordinary citizens into working for the guerrillas.

These kinds of measures, the manual said, should help to increase public support for the anti-Sandinista movement.

Leaders of the Nicaraguan guerrillas have been quoted as saying that passages urging assassinations or kidnappings were deleted from most of the manuals before they were distributed to guerrilla forces.

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Rep. Edward P. Boland (D., Mass.), chairman of the House intelligence committee, asserted on Thursday that the manual proved that the administration's motives in Nicaragua have not been, as the administration has contended, to halt arms shipments to Salvadoran guerrillas.

"The war is an effort to overthrow the Sandinistas," Boland said.

The so-called covert aid that the CIA has been giving the *contras* has been a matter of contention between Congress and the White House for at least two years. Most recently, funds for continued aid were cut off by Congress earlier this month.

The Inquirer's Washington Bureau said in April that low-level assassinations by U.S. personnel, or U.S.-supported personnel, were a distinct possibility in Central America.

A congressional source was quoted at the time as saying: "Some of our people may have to be a part of low-level assassinations and will have to keep their mouths shut to protect their cover."

The Reagan administration has made a major effort to build up clandestine services of the CIA since taking office in 1981, but, as has been always true with the CIA, has declined to make details public.

Officials have confirmed, however, that at least 800 staff positions in clandestine services that were cut during the Carter administration have been restored.

Various estimates have been made on the number of CIA agents assigned to the management of the so-called secret war by the *contras* against the Sandinistas, but no official figures have been available.

One responsible source has estimated the figure at 150. The CIA budget assigned to clandestine services has increased from about 2 or 3 percent of the overall CIA budget to about 10 percent, according to sources, although the CIA budget is classified.

Reaction to disclosure of the CIA manual reverberated throughout Washington yesterday.

The Senate intelligence committee called a hearing Monday and invited Casey to testify. The hearing is to be closed.

Speakes said that Reagan had not talked to Casey about the possibility of his stepping aside and that Casey had not offered to do so.

Inquirer Washington Bureau reporters David Hess and Charles Green also contributed to this article.

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