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Panel Chairman to Fight Contra Aid

Rep. Hamilton Backs Leadership on Covert Program

By Charles R. Babcock
Washington Post Staff Writer

Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.), in his first public statement as new chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said yesterday he will stick with the House Democratic leadership's effort to block covert CIA aid from anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua.

He said in an interview that he will schedule a series of closed hearings on the Nicaraguan covert aid program, including an inquiry into reports that the Central Intelligence Agency is channeling aid to the rebels through third countries, such as Honduras, El Salvador and Israel.

Rep. Joseph P. Addabbo (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House defense appropriations subcommittee, wrote Secretary of State George P. Shultz last week that such action would be "a rather devious contravention of the law." Hamilton said he didn't know if the reports were true.

The hearings on Nicaragua also will cover alleged atrocities by the Nicaraguan "contras," reports that U.S. military equipment is being transferred by the CIA to Afghanistan, and the possibility that the CIA evaded congressional spending limits, he said.

"If they want to come back and make a fight, there'll be a fight," Hamilton said of Reagan administration plans to continue to push for $14 million in additional funding for the contras. Congress cut off the aid last year. If the administration asks for twice as much money, Hamilton said: "I'd oppose it, maybe doubly hard."

The 20-year House veteran said he had heard reports that House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) was asking Democrats interested in serving on the committee to promise to oppose the Nicaraguan covert aid. Eight of the 14 committee members are being replaced, and about 100 members are said to be interested.

Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), new chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, has announced that he opposes continuation of the covert aid program in Nicaragua.

Durenberger has suggested that he would support some form of overt assistance to the rebels as a way of keeping pressure on the Sandinistas.

Hamilton said yesterday that he is willing to listen to administration proposals for alternatives to the covert aid program.

"I think the covert action type you have in Nicaragua, a paramilitary action, diverts the entire intelligence community so that it is not able to perform as well its function of intelligence analysis," Hamilton said. "It becomes a divisive matter. The top leadership of the CIA diverts a disproportionate amount of time to covert action, and intelligence-gathering suffers."

Hamilton said his agenda for the committee also includes an examination of the nation's ability to verify any arms control agreement with the Soviet Union, including President Reagan's "Star Wars" space-defense proposal.

Hamilton said he will work to repair the strained relations between the CIA and Congress, damaged last year by revelations of the agency's mining of Nicaraguan harbors and preparation of "assassination" manuals for the guerrillas.

While saying he has "a good relationship" with CIA Director William J. Casey, Hamilton added that the job should be filled with an intelligence professional rather than a political appointee. When asked whether he would tell President Reagan that he should replace Casey, Hamilton said, "I don't want to comment on that."

He refused to comment on a Washington Post report that the CIA's secret aid to insurgents in Afghanistan has become the largest item in its covert aid budget. But he said he plans to have the committee review all the CIA's covert action programs.

In a related matter, Paul Reichler, an attorney representing Nicaragua in its World Court case against the United States, said in an interview that an independent probe has obtained 200 signed affidavits from Nicaraguan victims or witnesses of human rights abuses by the contras.

Reichler said the affidavits are "a devastating indictment not only of the contras but of U.S. policy there" and will be used to bolster Nicaragua's suit seeking a World Court order against the contra program.

Staff writer Joanne Omang contributed to this report.

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