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3 Hearings Set on U.S. Ties to Accused Panama Strongman

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By SARA FRITZ, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—Members of three congressional committees said Friday that they intend to find out why the Reagan Administration maintains a relationship with Panama's military chief, Gen. Manuel A. Noriega, despite evidence that he is involved in drug trafficking and other crimes.

"President Reagan has said that drug trafficking is a national security issue," an aide to Rep. Charles B. Rangel (D-N.Y.) said. "How does that jibe with this?"

Rangel is chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, which will hold hearings next week into reports that the United States has ignored Noriega's alleged involvement in drug trafficking because he is a U.S. intelligence source. Among the witnesses invited are officials of the Drug Enforcement Agency and the CIA.

Closed Session Due

In addition, members of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere are planning an inquiry into the allegations, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has agreed to a request by Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) to review the Panamanian issue in a closed session June 23.

A Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee headed by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) contributed to the controversy by holding closed hearings recently into the allegations against Noriega, some of which were later leaked to the press. Helms has long been hostile toward the Panamanian government and toward the treaties under which the United States must relinquish all control over operation of the Panama Canal by the year 2000.

Sources said that none of these congressional committees was previously unaware of allegations against Noriega and about his connection with U.S. intelligence. One Senate source said the Administration has long cited national security interests as a reason for ignoring drug-trafficking accusations against officials of the governments of Panama and the Bahamas.

Stunning Details

Yet members of Congress, as well as some White House officials, said they were stunned by detailed allegations against Noriega disclosed by the New York Times—particularly a report that the Panamanian official has supplied guns to the Cuban-supported M-19 rebels in Colombia.

Two congressional sources reported that Noriega is believed to have a connection to U.S.-backed rebels fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The *contras*, as the rebels are known, have also been accused of involvement in drug trafficking. If these allegations are true, one source said, it could undermine Reagan's request for $100 million in aid for the contras now pending in Congress.

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