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By JAMES ROWLEY

CIA personnel directly supervised the mining of Nicaraguan harbors from a spy ship that has operated 12 miles from the coast of the Central American nation, congressional sources said Saturday night.

The mines, which have damaged at least seven ships in recent weeks, were laid by Latin American commandos operating in speedboats launched from the spy ship manned by CIA operatives, according to sources, who spoke on condition they not be identified by name.

The CIA has provided covert military support to rebels fighting Nicaragua's left-wing government for three years, but the mining operation marks the first time that agency personnel have become directly involved in combat, the sources said.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was fully informed about the operation, sources said.

Robert Sims, a White House spokesman on national security matters, declined to comment.

The spy ship has operated 12 miles from Nicaragua's coast, the territorial limit recognized by the United States even though Nicaragua claims territory extending 200 miles from its shores, the sources said.

Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., a member of the Select Intelligence Committee and a vocal critic of the Reagan administration's Central America policy, said the Senate was fully informed about mining operations when it voted 76-19 to approve \$21 million for covert military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

"I think there isn't much of anything that has been done down there in Central America that has not been available to the Senate," Leahy said.

"If they (senators) didn't make themselves aware of it, that was gross negligence. If they did make themselves aware of it and voted to continue it then what they are saying is they are very much in favor of the United States being involved in a mining of a harbor to be used by our allies," Leahy said.

"Everybody is welcome to their own view of foreign policy, that's obviously their view. I don't think we should be out mining our allies."

"I think that has caused a few strains in the alliance," he added.

"On the question of whether or not anyone should be mining the harbor, the answer is no," Joseph R. Biden Jr., D-Del., another member of the Senate intelligence panel, said Saturday night. "I think it is outrageous. There is no reason to mine the harbor. It is an act of war.

"These are not things that people should be condoning."

Leahy and Biden declined to discuss details of the mining operation or whether the CIA was involved, citing confidentiality of Intelligence Committee debates.

Britain has registered an informal protest of the mining, a British Embassy official who requested anonymity said Saturday. In a letter made public last week in the Nicaraguan capital city of Managua, French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson said France would be willing to clear mines if one or more of its European allies was willing to cooperate.