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ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A19

WASHINGTON POST
31 May 1986

CIA Was Behind Toppling Of Pastora, Contras Say

Associated Press

Nicaraguan rebel leader Eden Pastora quit the contra war effort after six of his top lieutenants left his command to join a rival U.S.-backed umbrella group at the urging of a man known to them as a CIA officer, according to officials of rival contra factions.

Rebel officers said a man identified only by the cover name of 'Armando" but previously known to them as a CIA contact offered Pastora's commanders military aid if they would join the U.S.-sponsored United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO). The rebels, known as contras or counterrevolutionaries, were told that the military aid would come through UNO but not where it would originate.

The desertions by all but one of his top commanders led Pastora to quit the contras two weeks ago and complain that "this is a war of the United States against Nicaragua."

Since 1984, Congress has barred the Central Intelligence Agency from giving military aid and advice to the contras, although the agency is allowed to exchange intelligence with them. The CIA has also secretly funneled several million dollars to the rebels for political projects this past year, U.S. officials say.

Rebel officials said UNO's Costa Rican-based forces recently received five shipments of arms that were used to entice Pastora's poorly supplied troops to switch allegiances. Bosco Matamoros, a contra spokesman, said UNO's military supplies came from "international sources" but would not elaborate.

Asked about a CIA role in Pastora's downfall, CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson had no comment. Pastora, now seeking political asylum, is being detained by Costa Rican authorities. In a telephone interview from jail, he also declined to discuss the alleged CIA role.

The rebel officials, representing both Pastora and UNO, said they have known "Armando" as an American CIA officer attached to the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica. The rebels, including Alvaro Jerez, a leader of a Pastora-allied group, said "Armando" has been for several years a CIA liaison to the rebels.

One Nicaraguan at a weeklong series of meetings in Costa Rica said "Armando" offered military aid to Pastora's commanders but insisted they first join UNO. On May 9, the Nicaraguan said, the commanders signed an agreement.

The ouster of Pastora culminates three years of CIA attempts to force the charismatic former Sandinista commander to unite with competing factions of the contra rebel movement and accept greater U.S. control.

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