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U.S. Role in Mining Nicaraguan Harbors Reportedly Is Larger Than First Thought

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration's role in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors is larger than previously disclosed, according to sources who say that units operating from a ship controlled by the Central Intelligence Agency in the Pacific participated in the operation.

Though anti-Sandinista insurgents have claimed credit for the mining, a source familiar with CIA briefings on the operation said that the units operating from the ship are self-contained, and are composed of Salvadorans and other Latin Americans from outside Nicaragua.

The mines were described as acoustic devices, triggered by the sounds made by ships traveling in the port and planted from small boats operating from the larger mother ship.

The mining operation, which has targeted two Pacific Coast ports, Corinto and Puerto Sandino, has been bitterly protested by the Nicaraguan government, which has accused the U.S. of playing a major role.

President Reagan, questioned about the matter at his news conference Wednesday, refused to comment, but the issue has provoked concern in Congress, even among those supporting CIA aid to the anti-Sandinista insurgents.

Many in Congress have feared escalation of the conflict if economic, as well as military targets, are attacked. Also, there is concern about the threat to non-Nicaraguan ships using the same ports.

Corinto is the port most affected by the mining, according to government statements in Nicaragua, and as many as seven ships, four of them foreign, have been described as having hit mines since late February. Two more vessels reportedly have hit mines in the smaller ports of Puerto Sandino and El Bluff on the eastern Caribbean coast, and ships at Puerto Sandino have come under attack from high-powered speedboats, according to news reports from Nicaragua.

Two anti-Sandinista groups, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force in the North and the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance in the South, have claimed responsibility for the mining and speedboat attacks, but Nicaragua says the U.S. is directly responsible because of the equipment used and skill of those involved.

The CIA is currently operating under a \$24 million appropriation to fund the anti-Sandinista insurgents, and the administration is seeking an additional \$21 million for the remainder of the fiscal year ending Sept. 30. These funds, as well as \$61.8 million in military aid for El Salvador, won final Senate approval yesterday, but Mr. Reagan faces continued opposition in the House, which has twice voted to cut off funding for the Nicaraguan war.

Without further funding, the administration estimates that aid for the insurgents will be exhausted by May, but there doesn't appear to have been a cutback in operations to date. Though there are fewer armed and trained fighters, the total insurgent force is estimated between 12,000 and 15,000, according to sources, and the revised limit approved by the administration is as high as 18,000.

Though the president enjoys bipartisan support in the Senate for at least limited funding for the insurgents, such moderate Republicans as Sen. William Cohen of Maine have questioned the mining in light of the threat to economic targets.

The Senate Intelligence Committee hasn't had a full briefing on the operation, but CIA Director William Casey recently appeared before the House Intelligence Committee, where details of the mining were apparently first disclosed to members of Congress.

During Senate debate this week, the Intelligence Committee chairman, Barry Goldwater, (R., Ariz.) surprised other senators by openly referring to a document or paper indicating that the administration had directly authorized the mining. Mr. Goldwater's remarks were dropped from the published record made available yesterday, and while an aide to the senator dismissed the matter, two other sources indicated that such a paper or staff memo did exist.

The House briefing was, in any case, more detailed, according to a source familiar with the presentation made by the CIA. According to this source, the units operating from the ship were described as separate from the "contras," or insurgent faction of native Nicaraguans whom Mr. Reagan has described as "freedom fighters" being helped by the U.S.

The administration has denied that it seeks to overthrow the leftist Nicaraguan government, and in an effort to reassure senators, the president sent a letter to Majority Leader Howard Baker (R., Tenn.) Wednesday night pledging that the U.S. "does not seek to destabilize or overthrow" the Sandinista regime.

The letter appeased Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, the ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, but Mr. Moynihan said yesterday that he remains concerned about the mining of the ports, both because of the threat to economic targets and potential violations of international laws of the sea.

There was unusually strong support among members of the Intelligence Committee yesterday for an amendment to prohibit any aid to an individual or group seeking the violent overthrow of a government in Central America. Of the panel's 15 members, six Democrats, including Sen. Moynihan, and one Republican, Mr. Cohen, backed the proposal, but it was tabled by the GOP leadership on a 51-44 roll call.

The Senate action came as Secretary of State George Shultz met privately with the bipartisan leadership of the House on the Central America aid package. Speaker Thomas O'Neill (D., Mass.) remains opposed to any funding for the CIA operation, and he later met with liberals pressuring for a strong stand against the administration when the two houses meet in conference to work out the final form of the aid bill.