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SUBJECT Covert Operations in Nicaragua Alleged

FRANK REYNOLDS: The President of the United States was asked today whether this country is carrying out covert operations against Nicaragua. The Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense were also asked the same question, and all three gave basically the same answer, no comment, which does not necessarily mean yes, but also may not mean no. So tonight we begin this broadcast with what we have learned about U. S. intentions in Nicaragua and Central America. First, here is Carl Bernstein.

CARL BERNSTEIN: President Reagan, according to high level sources, has authorized an extensive program of covert CIA operations aimed at Nicaragua's Sandinista government. As described to ABC News, the covert operations fall into three categories: paramilitary, political, economic and propaganda.

The paramilitary operations are to be undertaken by a CIA directed force of 500 or more men drawn from the security services of Venezuela, Colombia, Chile and other Latin American countries, by another 1,000 man commando force being trained by Argentina at the behest of the Reagan administration and as reported last month by ABC News White House correspondent Sam Donaldson, and by special action teams of former members of such elite U. S. military units as the Green Berets. These teams, said to be comprised of fewer than a dozen men each, are expected to engage in highly sensitive intelligence collection and demolition work, according to some sources.

The paramilitary operations are to be directed from a chain of commando camps in Honduras, near the Nicaraguan border. Some administration and intelligence officials, contrary to published reports, are attempting to picture the operations as somewhat limited in scope, scaled back, they say, from more ambitious plans

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that called for extensive sabotage of such Nicaraguan targets as power plants, roads and bridges. These officials insist that destabilization of the Sandinista government is not the objective and that the operations are basically intended to disrupt what the Reagan administration insists is a steady flow of arms sent by Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

According to several sources, the President's approval of the covert operations came after months of planning and debate, in which some high level officials warned that the secret operations could prove embarrassing and eventually fail.

Carl Bernstein, ABC News, Washington.

BARRIE DUNSMORE: This is Barrie Dunsmore.

While not denying secret operations in Nicaragua, Secretary Haig strongly asserted today that the U. S. was not engaged in any attempt to upset the government in Nicaragua.

SECRETARY OF STATE ALEXANDER HAIG: We never topple any government. We just want governments to be -- to live by rule of law and peaceful change.

DUNSMORE: Also today, there was phase 2 of the administration's effort to muster public support for its Central American policy, a briefing for a group of well-known American foreign policy specialists. Following that briefing, which included intelligence not to be made public, the question was were they convinced by the evidence that Nicaragua is directing the guerrillas in El Salvador.

FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE WILLIAM ROGERS: Anyone who heard the briefing would have to be convinced that the government's position is sound.

AMBASSADOR SOL LINOWITZ: I found what we were shown to be credible and quite persuasive.

AMBASSADOR ROBERT STRAUSS: I felt that the Department put on a rather impressive bit of evidence.

DUNSMORE: Meanwhile, in response to yesterday's CIA briefing on the military build-up in Nicaragua, the Nicaraguans today denounced the U. S. for violations of their air space. Minister Jaime Wheelock denied virtually all of the CIA's assertions. He also had a plausible reason for the lengthening of several airport runways: to make them usable for larger passenger planes.

The Nicaraguans then produced a contract with a Washington engineering, Wilbur Smith Associates, signed by the Somoza regime in 1976, dealing with the expansion of civil aviation.

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A spokesman for the company today confirmed the contract, but noted that given the limited demand, Nicaragua was building much ahead of its non-military needs.

Also today, Secretary Haig told a congressional committee that a cutoff of military assistance to El Salvador would be a fatal blow to the government there.

Finally, high administration officials today admitted the upcoming elections in El Salvador won't solve their problems, and they say that, at a minimum, the U. S. is going to have to send in from 250 to 300 U. S. military advisers.

Barrie Dunsmore, ABC News, the State Department.