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SENATOR ASKS IF ADMINISTRATION CROSSED THE LINE INTO ILLEGAL ACTS

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WASHINGTON

As long as the administration openly encourages gun running in Central America, more Americans will become involved, killed and put on trial and the distinction will be blurred between who's official and who isn't, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said Sunday.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said most members of Congress feel the U.S. government has overstepped the bounds by giving a "wink and a shrug" to private groups supporting Contra rebels seeking to overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

"I don't think we've had adequate answers whether the administration was involved with more than verbal encouragement of these people," Leahy said in a telephone interview from his home in Vermont.

"The question that hasn't been answered fully to all the congressional inquiries is whether they stepped over the line from political encouragement to illegal cooperation." Congress barred military aid from the United States to the Contras in 1984 but later authorized non-military aid.

The question of whether the U.S. government has gone beyond that has come under intense scrutiny since Eugene Hasenfus, an ex-Marine who once flew for Air America, a CIA-operated airline in Vietnam, was captured in Nicaragua after his arms-loaded plane was brought down by a Nicaraguan missile.

Hasenfus told a news conference in Managua Thursday that a man named Max Gomez and another Cuban-American "work for the CIA (and) did most of the coordination" for the gun-running flights he took part in.

On Saturday, Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American affairs, categorically denied that Hasenfus worked for the CIA. But he said it is possible Hasenfus thought there was some connection.

"This series of people who are, in fact, engaged and have been for the last couple of years in helping the Contras, they came in when the Congress

abandoned the freedom fighters in Nicaragua and they've been keeping them alive for two years," he said on Cable News Network's Evans and Novak program.

"They looked around and said, who's got some experience for this kind of work. And they came up with some people who were in Air America, which had connections with the CIA in Vietnam ... You'll find a close pattern of relationships here. You'll find some old school ties. But you won't find any current ties." Leahy said as long as people like Abrams openly encourage Americans going to Nicaragua, "more and more Americans will become involved, there will be some captured, some killed and some put on trial." And after a while, he said, "not only in the eyes of the United States but the rest of the world, nobody is going to see a distinction of whether they are there officially working for the United States or only with the encouragement of the United States.

"They are going to see U.S. citizens involved in the war in Nicaragua, now being held in a public trial viewed worldwide." Nicaragua has said it will try Hasenfus and might imprison him, if convicted, for 30 years.

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The senator added that he can't believe that "anyone in the administration can justify a policy that leads to that kind of worldwide show with very little to be gained." Abrams said the U.S. government does not attempt to learn the identities of what he said were thousands of Americans who help guerrillas in El Salvador or help the communists or the communist regime in Nicaragua.

"They have a right to do so as American," he said. "And we don't follow the people who are trying to help U.S. policy and restore freedom to Nicaragua. I don't know who they are." Leahy said that he has said repeatedly that whether one favors or opposes Contra aid "it's a mistake to send the CIA because when something goes wrong, it's going to be blamed on the CIA. I'd rather see us use the resources of the CIA in combatting terrorists."