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## PANEL ASKS HELP OVERSEEING COVERT ACTION

BY ROBERT DOHERTY

WASHINGTON

Leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee called Friday for an independent "watchdog" to help oversee U.S. covert activity and prevent Congress from being left in the dark about programs such as the U.S. arms sales to Iran.

A The committee's chairman and vice chairman said the panel would examine "alternative methods of independent auditing" and have asked national security adviser Frank Carlucci and acting CIA Director Robert Gates for their views.

P P "The committee is intensifying its oversight of covert actions," Sens. David Boren, D-Okla., and William Cohen, R-Maine, said in a statement. "An integral part of that is the need for a unit, independent of those conducting covert operations, to audit the activity."

In an interview, Cohen, the panel's vice chairman, said the committee was not certain how the auditing would be done but said it could be "along the lines of" the General Accounting Office, the agency that conducts investigations at the request of Congress.

Auditors could examine covert actions in "spot checks, so they are not monitoring every single thing but rather that the bureaucracy understands that they'd be subject to (scrunity)," Cohen said.

"Having that audit agency or unit there ... as a watchdog will serve as an incentive to (follow) the established guidelines," he said.

Cohen said he was unsure the idea "is going to be met with acceptance by the administration." He also did not know if the establishment of such an auditing group would require a change in federal law.

Boren and Cohen said the U.S. intelligence community generally has been helpful in providing information on covert actions to the committee but stressed the panel is solely dependent on those agencies for data.

"We only know as much as they tell us. They usually tell us everything but not always," said Cohen. "This is just a sort of safety valve against potential future abuses."

He said the audit group could help the congressional intelligence panels to keep track of the existence of covert activities and money spent on them.

The Maine Republican said the move was, in part, a response to the sale of U.S. arms to Iran. Members of Congress have been critical of the White House decision not to inform Capitol Hill of the initiative for nearly 11 months.

A subcommittee of the House Intelligence Committee is holding hearings on a bill that would require the president to notify Congress within 48 hours of any "significant" covert activity and to provide in advance to the congressional intelligence committees a copy of presidential directives authorizing secret operations.

The law now says the president in certain cases does not have to give prior notice and can inform Congress later "in a timely fashion."

House Speaker Jim Wright of Texas said at a hearing on the bill earlier this week that President Reagan could have averted "the colossal misjudgments" of the Iran-Contra scandal if Congress had been informed.

But House Republican leader Robert Michel of Illinois called the proposed law "the functional equivalent of a foreign policy straitjacket."