

Israel Picks Up the Slack Arming the Contras in Nicaragua

In July 1983 the *New York Times* reported the Reagan administration was preparing an alternative supply line to the contras in case the U.S. Congress cut off American support. That supply line was to be Israel. Congressional reaction to the mining of Nicaraguan harbors by the CIA has resulted in a cutoff of U.S. funds for the contras. The transcript which follows demonstrates that the Israeli arms pipeline is in full operation.

NBC News Nightly Broadcast

Anchorman: Tom Brokaw

*Reporter: Fred Francis on assignment in
Honduras/Nicaragua*

Date of Report: April 23, 1984, 5:30 p.m.

TB: Tom Brokaw

FF: Fred Francis

EB: Enrique Bermudez, Commander of the Rebel Forces

TB: We have learned that those American-backed rebels fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua are getting lots of weapons from one of America's closest allies—Israel. As Francis reports, however, it's a dangerous business all the way around.

FF: Soviet machine guns are used by the American-backed rebels in the war for Nicaragua. NBC News has learned that the state of Israel, at Washington's urging, has armed a quarter of the rebel army.

[Background of gunfire]

The rebels want Soviet weapons because they can capture ammunition from the Soviet-supplied Nicaraguan enemy.

EB: We received some weapons from the, the, that Israeli government took from PLO in Lebanon.

FF: Israel's Ariel Sharon, after two trips to Honduras, offered the spoils of the 1982 Lebanese invasion to the so-called covert war.

[Scene of clandestine airbase built by CIA]

The rebels store the weapons and ammunition here at this clandestine airfield. We are not permitted to tell you where we are, but it is from this field that the 47-year-old cargo plane, supplied by Washington, flies its air-drop mission deep into Nicaragua.

Crates of guns inventoried by the CIA. The agency must

approve every air drop into Nicaragua. Every one. Rebels complain that they don't get enough to arm all of their volunteers, so they can only harass, not topple, the regime in Managua.

Administration officials admit that they keep the rebels on a tight leash. As a result, for instance, this is the only cargo plane they are allowed to have.

CIA agents control this American-built airstrip and several administration sources say those agents get their orders from a special planning group at the White House. That's who controls this supply line to Nicaragua's rebels.

It is a dangerous supply route. The C-47 is very slow. Two others have gone down.

Four men and a door gunner protect it with automatic weapons. The drop zone is 110 miles from Managua. Commander Bermudez says 64 peasants are waiting for guns.

The rebel camp is sighted. The plane groans in a tight circle below a thousand feet. The men await a signal.

[Scene of the air drop from the plane]

The 64 volunteers stand fast in an L formation for orders to uncrate 64 rifles, 22,000 bullets, and a medical kit. Again, this is 110 miles from Managua.

[Scene of main rebel war room]

Bermudez offers a frustrated laugh at the White House policy which won't allow him to win.

FF: It's not working is it?

EB: It is not working. There is a conflict between an open war and with covert support.

FF: The rebels covert support could soon end. Many congressmen now believe that the president's policy is confusing and immoral. So 13,000 rebels could be abandoned, forced to turn again to Israel and others to save themselves from becoming refugees of a war lost in a divided Washington.

Fred Francis, NBC News, Honduras

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