

Papers reveal 1950s CIA plot

5/24/97
WASHINGTON (AP) - The CIA, plotting to overthrow the Guatemalan government in the 1950s, compiled "hit lists" and began training Central American assassins to kill political and military Communist leaders.

The assassination plans, revealed in newly declassified documents the CIA released Friday, were never carried out and never formally approved by top State Department and CIA officials or the White House.

But the idea to employ political murder in the coup was suggested from the start when the Truman administration launched the covert operation in 1952 under CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith, the documents show. And assassination was "a pervasive topic of conversation and planning" throughout the operation, which was revived in the Eisenhower

administration, said a senior CIA official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"In the end, it wasn't necessary," the official said. "No (hit) list was ever officially approved. No Guatemalan was ever assassinated."

Instead, the leftist President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman resigned June 27, 1954, two weeks after U.S.-backed rebels invaded Guatemala and more than two years after the CIA began planning for "the elimination of those in high positions of the government (that) would bring about its collapse."

The documents - just a fraction of those dealing with the Guatemalan operation - were released at the National Archives as part of a CIA

(Continued on Page A-11)

Papers

(Continued from Page A-1)

effort to declassify records on past covert operations. The intelligence agency was sued repeatedly over its refusal to make these and other documents public.

"It's too little too late," said Stephen Schlesinger, author of the 1982 book, "Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the America Coup," that detailed CIA activities in Guatemala. He filed suit 19 years ago to get the government to release the documents, but dropped the matter.

The documents indicate that exiled rebel leader Castillo Armas, who took over after the fall of Arbenz, gave the CIA a list of 58 individuals to be assassinated. One CIA official reviewing the proposal suggested, "even a smaller number, say 20,

would be sufficient."

In March 1954, the CIA drew up criteria for assassination targets:

- High government and organization leaders "irrevocably implicated in Communist doctrine and policy."

- "Out and out proven Communist leaders."

- Or people in key government and military positions of tactical importance "whose removal for psychological, organizational or other reasons is mandatory for the success of military action."

The CIA already was engaged in intimidation, including broadcasting propaganda about Arbenz and sending fake "death notices" to communist leaders. Tapes of 325 of the broadcasts also were released.

"The Nerve War Against Individuals" also included sending wooden coffins, hangman's nooses

and phony bombs to targets. "Here Lives a Spy" and "You have only 5 Days" were painted on their houses.

In 1953, the CIA included plans for "K" groups, or assassin teams, to work with sabotage groups, and rebels began training assassins. CIA headquarters in Washington sent 20 silencers for .22-caliber rifles to the rebel killers training in Honduras, said a Jan. 11, 1954, cable.

In the spring of 1954, CIA officers made official requests to the State Department to implement assassinations. No cabled replies were found.

Three weeks before President Arbenz resigned, a CIA field officer met with officials in Washington to submit the political assassination plan in person. It was ruled out "at least for the immediate future," according to a once-classified CIA history of the events that was written in 1995.