

U.S. Was Slow To Act on CIA's Suspect Colonel

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The U.S. government obtained information in October 1991 linking a paid CIA informer in the Guatemalan military to the slaying of a U.S. citizen there, but did not seek his prosecution inside Guatemala for the crime, U.S. intelligence sources said yesterday.

The CIA also failed to inform its congressional overseers until this year of its informer's alleged involvement in the slaying, a circumstance that provoked criticism yesterday from the Republican chairman and senior Democrat of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The officer accused of the slaying, Col. Julio Roberto Alpirez, was dropped from the CIA's payroll within months after his role became known to the agency but remained a clandestine CIA contact through July 1992. That was when he allegedly ordered another killing, the execution of a guerrilla fighter married to a U.S. citizen, the intelligence sources said.

The administration became convinced in January that Alpirez had links to the second slaying, and protested to Guatemala the following month, the sources said. Washington did so after an exhaustive intelligence community probe of the two deaths

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that was sparked by Clinton administration embarrassment over a hunger strike by the U.S. wife of the guerrilla fighter, the sources said.

In a secret Feb. 3 cable, Secretary of State Warren Christopher ordered the U.S. ambassador in Guatemala to tell President Ramiro de Leon Carpio that "we believe that . . . Alpirez as well as other officers" in military intelligence participated in the interrogation of guerrilla fighter Efraim Bamaca Velasquez "and may have first-hand information about Bamaca's fate."

But administration officials were

struggling to explain yesterday why the State Department never passed along to the fighter's wife, Jennifer Harbury, what it knew about Alpirez's links to the killing or to the CIA. Instead, the CIA told only a few lawmakers on Capitol Hill last month after first swearing them to secrecy.

The CIA informer's link to the killings became public Wednesday night after Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) accused the administration in a letter of deliberately misleading the public.

The revelation fits a pattern in which the CIA had on its payroll military and intelligence officers from Central American nations who were later implicated in killings, torture and other human rights abuses. The CIA has previously said that it merely paid for information from such persons and was not responsible for the abuses. But critics have accused the agency of promoting or tolerating brutal tactics as part of anti-leftist counterinsurgency programs.

Harbury, 42, who wed Bamaca in 1991, has accused the administration of withholding the information about her husband to avoid embarrassment over the CIA connection. "They simply didn't want me to know . . . because the person who ordered my husband's execution was a CIA agent," she said yesterday at a mobbed news conference on the Capitol lawn.

Looking exhausted, Harbury said she was ending her latest hunger strike after 12 days now that she was sure her husband was dead. She had been fasting, for the second time, to protest what she described as the U.S. government's failure to assist her adequately in finding out about her husband.

Senior U.S. officials said that at the direction of acting CIA Director William Studeman, the CIA's inspector general on Jan. 27 opened a probe into the agency's handling of the two deaths and of its links to Alpirez. That was two days after the agency secretly informed the White House of information it had just obtained from a Guatemalan informant about Bamaca's death.

But the administration spent much

of the day yesterday fiercely denying Harbury's charges of a deliberate cover-up, and attacking Torricelli for going public with the matter.

In his letter to President Clinton Wednesday, Torricelli said that "almost nothing that the United States has revealed about . . . [the two deaths] has been true." He also charged the CIA with "direct involvement" in the two murders because of its ties to Alpirez.

White House spokesman Michael McCurry said the administration had "pursued this matter diligently from the outset" at "a variety of levels," including at a December meeting between Clinton and the Guatemalan president. "We have, at every step of the way, as we had information that

was available, and subject to national security restrictions that do exist, shared that information with Jennifer so that she understands the information that's available to the government," McCurry said.

In a brief written statement, Studeman described as "a great disservice" Torricelli's claim that "the CIA is simply out of control." He also denied that the agency "had any information about the deaths of Michael DeVine and Efraim Bamaca Velasquez at the time the deaths occurred—and deliberately concealed such information."

Studeman confirmed that the CIA had obtained "credible information" about the two deaths. But his statement did not address Harbury's allegation that it has withheld crucial de-

tails about her husband's death from her for two months.

A CIA spokesman declined to comment, leaving unexplained why the agency maintained its contacts with Alpirez even after learning in October 1991 of his likely role in the June 1990 death of DeVine. An Illinois native, Devine was then running an inn in Guatemala near the headquarters of a unit commanded by Alpirez.

When the agency took Alpirez off the payroll in 1992, one U.S. government source said, it gave him a lump sum final payment. A group of soldiers was convicted in 1991 for participating in the killing of DeVine, but a captain who led the group escaped from a military prison shortly after the sentence was announced.

It is also unclear whether the CIA knew much before January about Alpirez's alleged role in Bamaca's death, which the agency now believes occurred in July 1992 after lengthy interrogation that likely included torture. One senior official described as an apparent "coincidence" the fact that the agency severed its ties with Alpirez around this period, but added that the circumstances remained murky.

"CIA officials acknowledged that they erred in not informing the intelligence committees until February 1995 of the intelligence in the DeVine case," said a statement issued yesterday by Senate intelligence committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Vice Chairman Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.). Christopher's February cable to

U.S. Ambassador Marilyn McAfee said that "for quite some time, it was standard operating procedure that captured guerrillas were held on various army bases and coerced into collaborating with the military. In many of these cases, captured guerrillas were reportedly exploited for their intelligence value and then killed."

But the administration did not end the longstanding U.S. program of training Guatemalan military officers until March 10, in a so-far unsuccessful effort to pressure the country into interrogating Alpirez and other officers.

Staff writers Dana Priest and Pierre Thomas contributed to this report.
