U.S. Ties to Guatemalan Military Come Under Intense Scrutiny

CIA Activities Prompt Pentagon Review of Involvement

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Ever since Guatemala refused to accept U.S.-imposed human rights conditions on military aid 18 years ago, the Defense Department has maintained minimal ties with the country's notorious armed forces.

Now even that reduced level of involvement has come under scrutiny, as the Pentagon's work in Guatemala has been made one subject of a broad probe of U.S.-Guatemalan relations triggered by revelations of controversial CIA activities in the Central American nation.

Pentagon officials are completing a review of 75,000 pages of documents and expect to be finished in several weeks. While it's too early to reach conclusions, officials say, there's no sign so far that the U.S. military did anything wrong.

But it was natural that the Defense Department's involvement in Guatemala should attract attention, observers say, given the brutality of that nation's armed forces and the record of U.S. military involvement with repressive right-wing governments in Central America in the past.

The Guatemalan military has killed an estimated 110,000 people in its 34-year-old war against a leftist insurgency. The Guatemalan armed forces have drawn criticism from Congress, successive U.S. administrations and human rights groups for their hand in many kidnappings and summary executions.

Still, U.S. military analysts cite the importance of maintaining contacts, even in the period when U.S. aid was cut off.

"Guatemala then, as now, was a pariah state," said Gen. Fred F. Woerner, commander of the U.S. Southern Command from 1987 to 1989, whose jurisdiction included Central America. "Even though you are in total disapproval of what's going on, you want to keep those lines of communication open. There's nothing sinister about it. It is better to have an open telephone line than a cut telephone line."

The current probe was begun after an anonymous tip was sent to a U.S. congressman suggesting that Defense Department personnel were implicated in a controversy involving the CIA. The tip came after revelations that a Guatemalan army colonel, who was a paid CIA informant, was involved in the murders of a U.S. innkeeper and an insurgent leader married to an American lawyer.

An anonymous note on National Security Agency letterhead sent to Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.), who first publicized the CIA allegations, said U.S. Army Spe-

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cial Forces personnel in Guatemala had provided information to the CIA informant about both the insurgent leader, Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, and the innkeeper. It also said defense personnel were destroying relevant documents.

"Preliminary indications, based on what we have analyzed so far, do not back up the allegations of wrongdoing," said Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon. "But we can't yet make a firm statement."

One area under investigation is whether the military assigned Special Operations forces to the CIA in Guatemala and, if so, whether the troops became directly involved in helping the Guatemalan military battle indigenous rebels. The Pentagon occasionally details troops to the CIA to train foreign forces in how to use a variety of weapons, as well as in engineering, demolition and communications skills.

U.S. military involvement in Guatemala has been dwarfed since the early 1980s by U.S. activities in helping the government in nearby El Salvador, where left-wing rebels were much stronger, and in supporting the contra rebels who fought Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government.

Involvement in Guatemala consisted mostly of work by a handful of training teams and military attaches, grants of nonlethal equipment and participation of U.S. troops on civic action exercises, according to interviews with current and former military officials and State Department documents.

Earlier, for about a decade beginning in the early 1960s, the Special Operations forces had advised and trained the Guatemalans on fighting guerrilla insurgents. But after 1977, when the Carter administration made human rights a foreign policy concern and was rebuffed by the independent Guatemalan armed forces, military involvement dropped off.

It picked up again in 1986 after the election of a civilian president, when Congress permitted training and increased aid to Guatemalan troops. But in 1990 aid and training were suspended temporarily over the military's lack of cooperation in bringing to justice the killer of innkeeper Michael DeVine.

"Guatemala was restricted from U.S. military assistance, both in equipment and training," said Lt. Col. Michael A. Sheehan, a counter-insurgency expert and director of political and military affairs at the U.S. mission to the United Nations. Even when those restrictions were eased, he said, the "reengagement" was "very cautious."

Three high-ranking U.S. officials involved in Central America in the 1980s and early 1990s said counter-insurgency intelligence gathered by the United States was not supposed to be passed on to Guatemalan officers during that period—but all three left open the possibility that some of it was.

"U.S. policy was not to facilitate killing guerrillas," as it was in El Salvador, said an official with experience in Central America. "That's not to say some portions of information couldn't have been provided. It was just not as immediate or quickly as in Salvador."

During the 1980s, the Reagan administration's efforts in El Salvador and Nicaragua sometimes spilled over to Guatemala.

For example, secret U.S. spy planes that flew almost exclusively over El Salvador made occasional trips over Guatemala as well, said a former high-ranking military officer. The missions were conducted under the code name Grisly Hunter.

In another military effort that touched on Guatemala, Reagan administration officials set up the Central American Joint Intelligence Team (CAJIT). Based within the Joint Chiefs of Staff structure, its purpose was to bring together in Washington "gargantuan amounts of information," as one participant said, from the Defense Department, the National Security Agency, the CIA

and other sources. The information would be quickly analyzed and passed back down to the Salvadoran military and the contras.

"It was tactical intelligence, real-time intelligence," said another former military officer involved in CAJIT.

"On occasion" CAJIT also dealt with Guatemala, said one of the high-ranking military sources.

By 1989, as the Salvadoran peace process supplanted the war, the focus of many U.S. government agencies, including the Pentagon, turned to the counter-narcotics campaign.

Today, the U.S. military presence in the country remains small. There are 14 Special Operation troops there, said a Pentagon official. Among them are three psychological operations, or "psyops," specialists who help monitor public opinion on American activities in the country. Four are communications experts with Fuertes Caminos, a U.S. military civic affairs exercise, whose job is to monitor communications among any nearby Guatemalans in an effort to protect U.S. troops.

The Pentagon used Special Operations forces in this way, instead of regular troops, because they are specially trained in the language and culture of a given country. "What they bring . . . is the ability to work with the local population, the foreign military and to teach and train them in a variety of areas, including medical assistance, infrastructure assistance," said Col. Robert Pilnacek, a spokesman for the Special Operations Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

The biggest U.S. military activity is the Fuertes Caminos exercise, which involves 3,700 U.S. soldiers. At any one time up to 630 of them rotate into the country for two-week stints to work with local officials to improve roads and schools, and offer other humanitarian relief.