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White House Orders Guatemala Probe

With Broad Mandate, Independent Advisory Panel to Report to Clinton

By R. Jeffrey Smith
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In response to allegations of CIA wrongdoing in Guatemala, the White House has given an independent advisory group a broad mandate to probe whether U.S. intelligence agencies paid adequate attention to human rights abuses in Guatemala and reported all they knew about the deaths of U.S. citizens there over the past decade.

National security adviser Anthony Lake, in a memorandum sent over the weekend to the chairman of the president's Intelligence Oversight Board, said the board should conduct a "government-wide inquiry" to determine whether "any intelligence regulations, procedures, or directives were violated" by the extensive covert U.S. intelligence operations in Guatemala.

The board's inquiry was provoked by specific allegations that a paid CIA informant in Guatemala was involved in the slayings of U.S. innkeeper Michael DeVine and Guatemalan guerrilla fighter Efraim Bamaca Velasquez, who was the husband of U.S. lawyer Jennifer Harbury. The allegations were first made March 22 by Rep. Robert G. Torricelli (D-N.J.) and later confirmed by U.S. officials.

But Lake's memorandum, dated April 7, makes clear that the probe should cover not only these cases but also examine "any intelligence that may bear on the facts surrounding the torture, disappearance, or death of any U.S. citizens in Guatemala since 1984," according to a copy of the memo obtained yesterday.

Lake asked the board in particular to review whatever the CIA and other federal agencies knew about the torture of Sister Diana Ortiz, a U.S. social worker, in 1989,

and the deaths in 1985 of U.S. journalists Nicholas Blake and Griffith Davis.

In the memo, Lake ordered the board to refer "possible violations of law" to the Justice Department but also to "make clear where allegations regarding these events are unfounded."

The memorandum's release represents the first time that the mandate for any investigation by the board has been divulged. Consisting of four citizens appointed by the president, the board was established as a secret channel of advice to the White House about possible intelligence community wrongdoing.

The board's chairman, local attorney Anthony S. Harrington, said in an interview yesterday that preliminary conclusions in the Guatemala probe would probably be supplied in confidence to President Clinton within 90 days. The study will complement probes already underway within the CIA and the departments of Justice and Defense.

"These are serious allegations . . . [and] we take them seriously," Harrington said. "There are conflicts in what people say" about the deaths that the board will have to reconcile, he added without elaboration.

Harrington is a former general counsel to the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton-Gore campaign, as well as a founding director of the Center for Democracy, a government-funded group that has been active in promoting democracy in Latin America.

The other board members include former National Security Agency deputy director Ann Z. Caracristi and Philadelphia investment banker Harold W. Pote. Former Air Force chief of staff Gen. Lew Allen Jr. was appointed to fill a board vacancy for the purpose of the study. Harrington identified Allen as a Republican and said his presence confirmed the group's bipartisan approach to the inquiry.