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CENTRAL AMERICA: ARMS TRAFFICKING ■

The crash in El Salvador last June of a munitions-laden airplane, registered in Panama but flying from Costa Rica, is the most obvious evidence to date of arms trafficking in Central America. Other information is fragmentary and usually inconclusive, but the smuggling is known to involve a number of countries and a variety of routes and methods. Based on often overlapping ideological and mercenary motivations, and largely generated by the unrest in El Salvador, the gunrunning so far has been limited to minor quantities of primarily small arms.

Clandestine trafficking in arms is far from new in the region but it reached an unprecedented peak in early 1979, when the Cubans initiated a major supply effort for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. After a brief respite in late 1979, the trafficking began to increase again early this year, although still at a much lower level than at the height of the Cuban effort.

Most of the traffic is directed toward El Salvador's various guerrilla groups, with lesser amounts targeted for insurgents in Guatemala. The left is not the only recipient; however, small deals reportedly are made occasionally by assorted rightwing groups, such as the remnants of the Nicaraguan National Guard.

Quantity and Types of Arms

Accurate estimates of the total amount of munitions currently involved cannot be made, but the trafficking is almost certainly not yet on a large scale. The best indicator of this is probably the level of activity of the insurgents themselves, especially in El Salvador, where the estimated 3,000 to 4,000 guerrillas are still not particularly well armed. Of late, however, the insurgents have begun to receive enough materiel to fight longer battles and to put more men in the field; they clearly expect to be getting more--and heavier--weapons.

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Shipments include a variety of small arms and automatic rifles, together with related ammunition and other supplies. Belgian FALA, Israeli Uzi and Galil, and US M-16s are guerrilla favorites, but obsolete or obsolescent rifles and handguns are no doubt shipped as well. The guerrillas reportedly are paying up to \$2,000 for an automatic rifle; mercenary pilots have been offered as much as \$10,000 per delivery flight, though the usual price is apparently half that or less.

Heavier or more sophisticated weapons--machineguns, mortars, rockets--are increasingly talked of but have only recently begun to show up in combat in any noticeable quantity. The first antitank rocket--a Chinese-made version of a Soviet design--was not captured from the guerrillas in El Salvador until mid-August, for example, although since then rockets have been used in a number of scattered assaults, including the attack on the US Embassy in San Salvador on 16 September.

Delivery Routes

Certain trafficking "routes"--mechanisms of procurement and delivery--can be traced in a general way. The major one either originates or passes through Costa Rica, where participation in all aspects of the trafficking by many officials and private citizens--primarily for personal profit--is well documented. Arrangements can probably be made relatively easily for the purchase and delivery of virtually any cargo to any destination, providing only that "the price is right."

Information which is less conclusive than that on the mercenaries' routes strongly suggests--and even sometimes substantiates--the existence of other supply and delivery mechanisms that make use of Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, and Mexico. Using much the same land, sea, and air transports as the commercial operations, and even many of the same mercenaries, these conduits are more ideologically motivated.

Diverse Sources

The sources of the materiel are equally diverse. The bulk so far seems to have come from arms left over from the civil war in Nicaragua. Anywhere from a tenth to a

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third of the many tons of arms consigned to the Sandinistas in 1978-79 are estimated to have been withheld by Panamanian and Costa Rican middlemen for subsequent resale. The munitions with Venezuelan markings aboard the plane that crashed in June apparently came from these stocks.

Additional arms have been purchased on the illegal international market, but these transactions are even more difficult to trace through a complete purchase-to-delivery cycle. This clandestine trade appears to have well-established and smoothly functioning networks. Arrangements are obscured by extensive cover-up efforts, however, comparable to those used in the narcotics trade, which may often overlap with arms trafficking.

Most of the smuggling so far seems to have stemmed from purchases made by the guerrillas themselves, using funds obtained from ransoms, robberies, and foreign donations. There are indications, however, that a small but growing proportion of the arms is being provided directly by revolutionary sympathizers around the world.

Cuban and Nicaraguan Involvement

The Cubans, working mostly through local sympathizers or mercenaries, seem to be behind most of this effort in one way or another. In addition to purchasing arms on the illegal market or shipping them from its own supplies, Havana also apparently expedites materiel sent by the USSR, Eastern Europe, the PLO, and possibly others. Recent reports suggest a growing interest on the part of these "outsiders" in providing funds, arms, and other support to various Central American revolutionary groups.


The precise extent of Nicaraguan involvement remains unknown. The Cubans--and possibly the Soviets as well--have introduced sizable shipments of weapons into Nicaragua, however, and some of this reportedly has been transhipped to Salvadoran and other insurgents. Although witting of these Cuban activities, the Sandinistas have probably furnished only symbolic quantities of arms themselves and seem constrained to avoid more open involvement.

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Outlook

On the whole, although regional arms trafficking seems to be rising slowly, the variety of routes and suppliers, and especially the intermittent nature of the shipments, suggest that it is still a limited and uncertain operation. The various governments involved, however, lack either the capability or the will to stop the flow--or indeed are actually bent on increasing it. Given a continuation of political unrest in the region, arms smuggling will certainly persist at least at present levels, and could easily and quickly show a sharp increase at any time.



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