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Contra Aid Request Down To \$36 Million; Summary Of Events & Statements On Feb. 3-4 Congressional Vote, Jan. 20-26

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 20: Senate minority leader Bob Dole suggested that the White House postpone its request for new aid because he feared it might fail at this time. Jan. 21: Two House Democrats Byron L. Dorgan (ND) and Jim Moody (Wis.) renewed their call for the resignation of Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. They charged in a letter to Reagan that Abrams' admission last year that he gave misleading testimony to Congress about the Iran- contra affair makes him unfit to serve as the administration's "leading architect and spokesman" on Central America policy. In June last year, joined by more than 120 colleagues, the two had also asked for Abrams' resignation. In their letter, Dorgan and Moody said Abrams has "violated" the standards of "fairness, honesty and integrity" necessary to the debate on contra aid. "How can the American people have faith in a policy when its key spokesman is so clearly lacking in credibility?" they asked. Jan. 22: Nineteen House Democrats wrote to Reagan requesting a delay in his request for more contra aid. Most of the Democrats are members of a bloc of swing votes that will determine the fate of further US aid. The letter also urged Reagan, assuming the aid request is not postponed, to limit it to non-lethal assistance. House Democratic Whip Tony Coelho (D-Calif.) said that Congress and the administration should abide by the compromise established in December calling for the vote on Feb. 3 in the House and the next day in the Senate. Under that plan, if Reagan loses, he would have no further opportunity for a guaranteed congressional vote on the issue, although he could seek a vote on additional aid through regular legislative channels that could more easily be blocked by the Democratic leadership. "We view any move to advance new US aid to the rebels as extremely risky and a threat to lasting peace in Central America," the 19 Democrats said in their letter. "The US must not be the obstacle to peace in Central America." The letter was written by Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.). He disclosed the letter as he and about 130 colleagues traveled to a meeting of House Democrats in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Among those signing the letter were members who have voted for contra aid in the past, including Robin Tallon (SC), Lawrence J. Smith (Fla.), and Albert G. Bustamante (Tex.). It was also signed by Texas representatives Mike Andrews and Jim Chapman, considered to be swing voters. According to White House officials, Reagan has decided to postpone until the last minute a decision on how much aid he will request for the contras. In a speech, Reagan promised that any military aid would be converted to what he called "humanitarian aid" if the contras and the Sandinistas reached a settlement. The 20-minute speech to supporters at the White House was his second in 48 hours on the contra issue. He also planned to devote a significant portion of his State of the Union Message on Jan. 25 to the question of supporting the contras. The White House said he would also speak on the subject Jan. 27 and Jan. 29, and again in a nationally televised address on the eve of the vote, Feb. 2. During a speech to the Republican National Committee, White House chief of staff Howard Baker said he was upset upon hearing that the Reagan administration does not want peace in Central America, but rather a military solution. "[T]hose people know full well that it was Ronald Reagan and this administration who first advocated to the OAS, in statements by this President, 'Look, we don't want just to contain communism in Central America. We did

that in Cuba. We want to democratize Central America. We want Nicaragua to have democracy." According to Baker the administration proposed direct talks between the "freedom fighters" and the Sandinistas. He said Reagan had promised that the US government would be the first to say, "We will discontinue aid and assistance of military supplies in exchange for...negotiated cease-fire." Jan. 23: In an interview with the New York Times, Rep. Albert G. Bustamante (D-Tex.), who has previously voted for contra aid, said he would vote against all such aid now. "I'm against it. I just couldn't go along again. We've run the whole course on this and it just hasn't worked." Senate minority leader Dole said that the margin in the Senate was perhaps only one vote. "On the Senate side, there's a possibility of 51 votes." A State Department official cited by the Times said that the administration would not consider postponing the vote. Officials say they will not send up a package that does not include any military aid because the contras are allegedly running out of ammunition and other military supplies. In his radio address, Reagan said that the Feb. 3 vote may be the most important one before the Congress. "At stake here is whether Nicaragua becomes a Soviet base camp on the mainland of this hemisphere...Some say that if you're for aid to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua you're against the peace process. Phooey." Rep. Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.) who delivered a radio address on behalf of the Democrats, said: "The vote for more contra aid is a vote for more war, more Soviet aid. A vote for more contra aid also kills the peace process." Jan. 24: Asked about an escrow plan on the ABC News program "This Week With David Brinkley," House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) said, "If the president requests it, I'll consider it I think it's worthy of consideration." Wright said he would be guided by recommendations from the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Honduras as to whether the contras should receive further non-lethal aid. On the same program, Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams said that the Sandinistas have been backed into a "corner," and that the "only possible escape for them" is through an appeal to Congress. If the administration loses the contra aid vote on Feb. 3-4, said Abrams, "I think that we're only a few years away from Soviet domination of this region between Mexico and the Panama Canal. That's a national security nightmare." Wright pointed out that six years of war had not produced "any concessions" from the Nicaraguan government. "Their Central American neighbors have been trying to make peace for only six months, and it has produced a great many concessions...I don't know if [the Sandinistas] can be fully trusted. But I think they have to be tested." Administration officials said the aid package would be submitted Jan. 27, and include about \$40 million of nonlethal aid and \$5 million of military aid that would be put in escrow. Rep. David E. Bonior (D-Mich.), at the House Democrats' annual issues conference in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., called the escrow possibility "a gimmick to trigger a release of funds" to the contras by the administration. He added that any humanitarian aid should "go through the Red Cross and not the (Central Intelligence Agency)." Jan. 25: In his State of the Union address, Reagan called on Congress to continue contra aid. According to Reagan, the crisis in Nicaragua has a special dimension because of its proximity to US borders. A senior administration official cited by the New York Times said on the evening of Jan. 25 that Reagan would ask for "under \$50 million," and no more than 10% of the same would be military aid. On the Senate floor prior to Reagan's address, minority leader Dole said that without continued contra aid, the regional peace agreement "will never work." He added, "I have suggested either delaying the vote" or putting money for military aid in escrow. Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.), deputy majority whip, said Reagan "has pitted himself against five Central American presidents" who signed the peace accords. He said a package that placed military assistance in escrow was "fraught with phoniness and gimmicks." House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Tex.) said, "One very strong ingredient of anything you put in escrow is the question of whose certification releases the escrow." The speaker added that if "you leave it to the whims of

the State Department and the National Security Council," then having the money in escrow makes little sense. According to House majority whip Rep. Tony Coelho (D- Calif.), the only way such a move would likely be viewed favorably by most members of Congress, is "if they decide to dress it up, saying that some other group could decide who could pull the trigger." Jan. 26: According to a plan approved by Reagan, the White House will ask Congress for \$36.25 million in aid for the contras to cover the period ending roughly July 1, which includes \$3.6 million for weapons purchases. The military aid would be held in escrow until March 31, and released if the contras and the Nicaraguan government have not yet reached agreement on a cease-fire. Democrats said they would nevertheless oppose the plan, to be submitted to Congress Jan. 27. An aide to House Speaker Jim Wright said, "We're very clearly dead set against" the administration proposal. The aide added that holding military aid in escrow "is a built-in incentive to the contras not to agree to a cease-fire. I think we can beat this." Rep. Coelho, who heads the House Nicaragua task force, said that "this isn't a moderate request at all...The delay on the military aid is just a gimmick that won't fool anybody up here," he said. Sen. Christopher Dodd said the proposal "is certainly more appealing." However, he added that "any assistance is a mistake." On the morning of Jan. 26, Reagan met with several senators who are considered swing votes. They told him the House would defeat the aid request if the decision to release military aid was left to the White House alone. Reagan's aides were reportedly consulting with attorneys late on Tuesday to see how Congress might be included in the decision. Citing administration officials, The Los Angeles Times reported that Reagan intended to send Secretary of State George Shultz on a mission to Central America to dramatize the appeal for contra aid. As pointed out by the New York Times, the \$36 million figure understates the cost of the package. The White House is also requesting \$20 million to put in an account for self-insurance of the aircraft used to ferry equipment to the contras. Officials say they do not intend to spend that money. But if a contra supply plane crashes, the cost of replacing it would come out of that fund. In addition, Washington spends money for surveillance of Nicaragua by satellite, SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft, unmanned aerial drones and other means. The information from that is used in part for planning airdrops to the contras. (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, Washington Post, New York Times, Los Angeles Times)

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