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Plane Crashes East Of San Salvador, Allegedly Carrying Arms For Rebels; Nicaragua Blamed

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 25, Salvadoran and US military officials said a plane carrying missiles and other weapons presumably for the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) crashed in a soybean field north of the town of El Transito, about 60 miles east of San Salvador. Salvadoran soldiers and a US military adviser were at the site within an hour of the crash. Three crew members were fatally injured and a fourth reportedly committed suicide. Military sources said the flight of the twin-engine Cessna 310 originated in Nicaragua and that the crash was proof the Nicaraguan government smuggles weapons to the FMLN. The Cessna was carrying 24 Soviet-made surface-to-air missiles, one US-made Red-Eye missile, a Soviet-designed anti-tank weapon and mortar shells. The Cessna, painted black and with no registration number, did not burn. Col. Ricardo Casanova, commander of the 6th army brigade, said it crashed when it ran out of fuel. On Saturday afternoon, the Salvadoran military press office said a second light plane was set afire on a dirt landing strip seven miles southeast of Zacatecoluca. It said residents of the area told army officers the plane's crew unloaded boxes, presumably containing ammunition, after it landed. It was unable to take off, due to lack of fuel or other reasons. Fredy Garay, a peasant who lives about a mile from the Cessna crash site, told reporters he heard a sputtering motor and the sound of a crash at 5:30 a.m. He said as he and a friend approached the wreckage they heard a single shot. Garay said two of the plane's crewmen were dead, one died shortly after he and his friend arrived and the fourth was dead from a bullet wound in his right temple. Three of the victims wore military fatigue uniforms. None of the four had identification papers, and journalists were told it was presumed they were Nicaraguans. An officer showed reporters a Belgian-made Browning pistol that he said presumably was used by the crewperson who shot himself. Engraved on the pistol was, "Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua." Rebels later fired on a military helicopter carrying reporters to the site of one of the two planes and two foreign cameramen were wounded. Colleagues said Hugo Burgos, a cameraman for Cable News Network, and Alfredo Hernandez Lopez, a reporter for the Mexican government radio network were wounded when the guerrillas opened fire near Zacatecoluca. For several years, the Salvadoran government has charged Managua with supplying weapons to the FMLN. No hard evidence had been provided. Nov. 26: Three photographers were detained briefly by the military when they went to photograph the plane that had been set on fire. The three are Juana Anderson of The Associated Press, Dayna Smith of The Washington Post and Daymon Hartley of the Detroit Free Press. They were held for not having permission to be in the zone of the plane. At a news conference on Sunday morning, President Alfredo Cristiani said that the Cessna was registered in Nicaragua and had taken off from an airstrip at Montelimar, formerly an estate of the Somoza family on the Pacific coast west of Managua. Nov. 27: The Salvadoran government identified the pilot of the plane, killed in the crash, as Mauricio Quiroz Garcia, 36, a former pilot in the Nicaraguan air force. In Nicaragua, a pilot by that name who works for the government's Aeronica airline told AP he was "totally baffled" by the Salvadoran government's reports. Nicaraguan Defense Minister Humberto Ortega said he knew nothing about the plane. He said the missiles could be part of a US shipment of 300 sent in 1985 to the contras, and that by now the rockets could be "in anyone's hands, in any market." Nicaraguan

officials have refused to deny or confirm that the plane was Nicaraguan-owned. (Basic data from AFP, 11/25/89, 11/26/89; AP, 11/25-28/89; New York Times, 11/27/89)

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