

Panama's Paredes tied to cocaine mob

by Gretchen Small

General Rubén Darío Paredes, the former head of Panama's National Guard, has exposed himself as an asset of the cocaine mob, tied to the drug czars under Fabio Ochoa. But Henry Kissinger and the U.S. State Department promote him as a U.S. "card" against "Torrijismo," the nationalist current inspired by the late Gen. Omar Torrijos.

Under State Department direction, the Defense Forces of Panama have been slandered internationally as an institution of drug-runners. Its commander, Gen. Manuel Noriega, is painted as the ring-leader. The Paredes scandal sheds new light on the matter. General Noriega leads the faction within the Defense Forces which Paredes spent his career trying to destroy. Now, with Paredes's ties to the cocaine mob out in the open, the drug connection falls at the doorstep of the State Department.

The Paredes and the Ochoas

"Three Panamanians Kidnapped By the Ochoa Family, Kings of Colombian Drug Traffic," the Panamanian daily *La Critica* blasted out on its front page March 21. Colombian radio speculates that the mob sought to "settle accounts," *Critica* reported, for an unpaid balance: Panamanian pilot Cesar Rodriguez, nicknamed variously "Captain Poison," "Lavamático," or, simply, "Mercenary," for his drug- and gun-running to all sides in Central America, is one of the missing, *Critica* reported; the second was a less-known young Panamanian woman named Nubio Pino de Bravo.

The name of the third soon made front page news: General Paredes's son, Rubén Darío. The reason for the mob's vengeance soon emerged. On March 21, Colombian authorities seized a luxury yacht as it refueled at the island of San Andres. Found aboard: 304 kilos of cocaine, 80% pure. Owner of the yacht: "Crystal Sky Investments." Lawyer for Crystal Sky: the junior Paredes.

Details of junior's business surfaced. Rodriguez, who flew weapons to the Sandinistas in 1979, to the Salvadoran insurgents a few years later, and most recently to the Nicaraguan "contras," was the owner of several of Panama's ritziest discos. His headquarters in Panama City, also an exclusive nightclub, was located on the 20 floor of . . . the Bank of Boston building.

"Apparently Paredes or Rodriguez had commercial rela-

tions with the Ochoas, in the buying of walking horses," *La Estrella* of Panama reported dryly. The Ochoa clan owns more than horses. Clan head Fabio was implicated in the assassination of Colombian Justice Minister Lara Bonilla. The Ochoas had been co-owners, with fugitive Pablo Escobar, of "Tranquilandia," the enormous jungle cocaine laboratory which Colombia's military destroyed on orders of Lara Bonilla. Jorge Ochoa now sits in a Spanish jail, charged with cocaine trafficking.

General Paredes sent a telegram to President Belisario Betancur, pleading for Colombian authorities to help find his son, whom he said had disappeared the afternoon of March 13, after checking into a Medellin hotel two days before, with "a friend." He issued appeals on Colombian radio, reporting that his son's business was "import-export of diverse items."

Paredes called up the Ochoa family in Medellin. "General Paredes says that he could establish that his son was not in the power of the Ochoas, because they assured him of that," *La Estrella* reported. The telephone call, Paredes explained, was arranged "through an old friend of his in Panama."

On March 25, the three missing Panamanians were dug out of a Medellin cemetery. All had been killed in the customary manner of the mafia's death squads, hands tied, blindfolded, without underwear, a single bullet hole in the left side of the head. General Paredes defended his son to the end. "He did not deserve this end," said the General. He was "a youth with a good heart, an adventurer like any 25-year-old."

General Paredes, widely rumored to have participated in the August 1981 assassination of President Omar Torrijos, became head of the National Guard less than six months after Torrijos died. Trained at Somoza's Nicaraguan Military Academy, Paredes was held up in Washington as a model "staunch anti-communist." Torrijos headed the military current which saw economic development as the key to a nation's security, and the only route for peace in Central America; Paredes was the man assigned to overturn the Torrijos project. Henry Kissinger took a personal interest in hosting Paredes around the U.S. capital.

Paredes is typical of Kissinger's "anti-communists." He was the main Panamanian backer of Colombia's Gnostic terrorist movement, the M-19, and was fond of praising the drug-running terrorists in private. When Qaddafi's arms dealer, Hugo Spadafora, and his then-ally, former Sandinista Eden Pastora, ran into financial trouble for their "contra" operation in 1983, Paredes bailed them out, said a London newsletter at the time.

Paredes' term as commander was dedicated, in foreign policy, to trying to sabotage Panama's participation in the Contadora Group, the Ibero-American diplomatic body which Panama helped found; and domestically, trying to dismantle the nationalist labor-military-industry coalition which Torrijos had created. Panama's "opposition" to the Torrijos project, led by the World War II Nazi criminal, Arnulfo Arias, hailed Paredes as a man with whom they could work.