

# José Blandón: paid to lie

by Catalina Metzler

Two days after Gen. Manuel A. Noriega, commander of the Panama Defense Forces, was indicted by a Miami grand jury on trumped-up charges of drug trafficking and money laundering, the U.S. Senate scheduled hearings on Panama to keep up the momentum of a massive media campaign against the general. The four-day event Feb. 8-11, staged by the Senate Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics, and International Operations, was meant to be Noriega's trial *in absentia*. The media were the "jurors."

Noriega's attorneys asked to be allowed to cross-examine the witnesses, but subcommittee chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.), refused to allow it, saying that the hearings were not a trial. He issued an "open invitation" to the general to come to testify.

Aside from New York County District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau and Gen. Paul Gorman, the witnesses were either criminals or Noriega's political enemies. These included Leigh Ritch, Floyd Carlton, and Ramón Milian Rodríguez, all three convicted of drug crimes in American courts.

But the "star witness" was José Blandón, the former Panamanian consul general in New York fired by the government of Panama after it was discovered that he was conspiring with the U.S. State Department to oust Noriega. His nine hours of sworn testimony produced startling charges that made front-page headlines for most of a week. But before that week was out, many were not believing him.

## Credibility questioned

It took a while for the media to digest the manic statements by Blandón, who had to be "slowed down" by Senator Kerry on several occasions. But almost as quickly as he made his wild charges, his credibility as a "most reliable source" began to shred.

Knowledgeable sources believe that Blandón was a CIA mole planted in the Panamanian government long ago, available for use "at an appropriate time"—and this was that time. Other sources suggest that, like Nicaraguan defector Maj. Roger Miranda, Blandón was a paid defector, hired by the U.S. government as a last resort in the effort to oust Noriega.

In an interview shown on Panamanian television in Au-

gust 1987, Blandón had stated there were no Panamanian officials involved in drug trafficking or money laundering. At the time, Blandón had called the charges against Noriega and Panama "fabrications" by the "secret government" within the Reagan administration. He singled out former National Security Adviser Adm. John Poindexter and fired NSC staffer Lt. Col. Oliver North as the sources of the campaign against Noriega. But now, Blandón had changed his story 180 degrees.

## Not even the Times believes him

Ray Takiff, one of Noriega's attorneys in Miami, simply dubbed Blandón's testimony "ridiculous." "The man is a liar," Takiff said, and charged that Blandón was being handsomely paid by the U.S. government for his testimony. "He is an opportunist, and this is his opportunity."

Blandón is indeed a liar, but not a very professional one. His "story" is so full of contradictions and accusations in all directions that, by the second day of his testimony, U.S. agencies, including the CIA, and individuals whose names had cropped up, began to question his reliability. Even the *New York Times*, the newspaper which launched the massive disinformation campaign against Noriega back in July 1986, felt compelled to call into question Blandón's credibility.

"On a number of sensitive issues, Mr. Blandón's public statements in different places have appeared inconsistent," wrote the *Times* on Feb. 11, lamely observing that most of what he said "is from memory." The paper quoted a Senate staff member saying, "There's been a lot of heat on him."

## The coaches

The heat has come from his coaches, who have told him, as the *New York Times* reported, what to say and what not to say. Interestingly enough, according to the *Times*, Blandón was urged not to bring up allegations about drug trafficking by elements of the Honduran military. *EIR* has exposed the Reagan administration's cover-up of Honduran drug connections for fear that the truth about the Honduras-based Contras' ties to drug trafficking would come out into the open.

"Before his testimony," the *Times* reported, "some administration officials urged people who know Mr. Blandón to advise him to focus his testimony on General Noriega's crimes and not on other issues. . . . Last Sunday, for example, William G. Walker, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Affairs, telephoned Gabriel Lewis Galindo . . . and advised him that Mr. Blandón would be most effective as a witness if he concentrated his testimony on Panama. 'He mentioned at some point that we are going to lose the focus on Noriega if he discussed all the other issues he knows about,' said Mr. Lewis, who relayed the message but denied that he pressured Blandón to alter his testimony."

Like Gabriel Lewis Galindo, the godfather of the Washington-based "Civic Crusade," anti-Noriega operation, Blan-

dón is being run by Dr. Norman Bailey, the Eastern Establishment's "behind the scenes" case officer for the campaign against Noriega. From the Senate side, the key players are Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) and Deborah DeMoss, Sen. Jesse Helms's (R-N.C.) staffer for Central America.

Blandón's lack of credibility became a matter of concern for the senators running the show. "Publicity people would try to do anything to discredit the testimony of Mr. Blandón," D'Amato told the subcommittee and the press Feb. 10, after several reporters raised the issue of the inconsistency in Blandón's statements. Blandón's fairy tale that he had seen documents with "CIA" and "National Security Council" letterheads "marked classified," with information on the "private lives" of several senators, created such an uproar that D'Amato went on national television to defend his star witness. The CIA is precluded by law from spying on U.S. citizens in the United States. In addition, making the information available to foreign countries would be another violation of U.S. law.

Appearing on ABC's TV program "Nightline" Feb. 9, Senator D'Amato told the American people that Blandón had no reason to lie. ABC's Ted Koppel told D'Amato that if Mr. Blandón were to be caught telling one lie, it would discredit his entire testimony.

The next morning, subcommittee chairman Kerry reminded Blandón that he could still "change his testimony if you feel something is not accurate." Blandón responded by reiterating every one of the allegations, including the one on the CIA, which the Agency vigorously denied. Kerry then insisted that Blandón was an "extraordinarily credible witness," and a "distinguished public servant" who is risking his life and that of his family by testifying. "No one has ever alleged he is making money," Kerry said.

### **Echoing the CIA**

Blandón's testimony was also questioned on his allegations against Lyndon H. LaRouche.

Blandón testified, under oath, that LaRouche had in effect destroyed the "Blandón Plan," a State Department plan for Noriega to voluntarily resign in return for immunity from prosecution. Blandón claims that Noriega asked him to draw up the Plan.

Blandón testified that LaRouche was in the pay of Noriega. "Mr. LaRouche works for Mr. Noriega," he said. Elaborating, Blandón said, "Mario Parnter is a member of a political group in Panama who came to the U.S. to make a presentation in favor of Lyndon LaRouche." Parnter is a Panamanian lawyer and a leader of Panama's ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party, who testified before the Commission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in the United States in September 1987. The commission was studying the political vendetta being carried out against LaRouche and associates.

Blandón continued, Parnter "spoke to me about the role of Lyndon LaRouche with respect to Panama and that he, Mario Parnter, met with LaRouche in Boston, and on his return he spoke to me in New York. That was last year, and he is the young man who Noriega used as a witness in a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to talk about my activities in the United States."

Blandón blamed Parnter—indirectly, LaRouche—for having changed Noriega's position on the Blandón Plan.

But in his testimony the next day, Feb. 10, he did not blame LaRouche, but the Medellín Cartel of cocaine traffickers for destroying the Blandón Plan. He now said that the Medellín Cartel did not want Noriega to withdraw from his position and gain immunity, because "he knows too much." Therefore, they vetoed his plan.

Blandón's lies on the *Pia Vesta* affair, the Danish ship caught by Panama in 1986 with a large cargo of East bloc arms, prompted the *New York Times* Feb. 11 article questioning his credibility. Blandón had told the *Times* Feb. 4 that he believed General Noriega's version, that Lt. Col. Oliver North planned to use the *Pia Vesta* affair to make it appear that the Sandinistas were shipping East bloc weapons to the Salvadoran guerrillas. But *EIR* established that the *Pia Vesta* cargo was arranged by North, and was to be delivered to the Contras via El Salvador.

Kerry asked Blandón for his "personal opinion" on whom the weapons were going to. Blandón said he believed they were going to the Peruvian Navy—the cover story put out by CIA at the time. But the same Blandón had told Kerry and his staff in closed sessions that he believed Noriega was telling the truth in pinning the shipment down to North.

### **No evidence seen by military**

Blandón's wild charges were echoed by three convicted criminals. But not by Gen. Paul Gorman's testimony. The head of the U.S. Southern Command from 1981 to 1985, Gorman told the subcommittee that he saw no evidence of Noriega's drug ties. He said he had "rumors" and "reports from second and third parties," but no real evidence. He added that the first time he saw "documents" linking Noriega to "money laundering" was in 1986 when he was part of the President's Commission on Organized Crime.

Gorman took the opportunity stress the crisis in Colombia where, as he put it, the drug mafia is threatening the very survival of that nation. He called for a "long-term comprehensive strategy" against drugs in the Western Hemisphere and complained that the Pentagon refuses to see the drug threat as a U.S. national security issue. Gorman criticized the Department of State for ordering U.S. ambassadors in Colombia and other nations to discourage those countries' militaries from engaging in the fight against drugs. The State Department's argument is that an active military "threatens" democracy. Drugs don't, evidently.