

Bush administration set for showdown with Panama

by Carlos Wesley

The United States is planning for chaos and a possible military intervention against Panama right after that country's national elections May 7, unless its hand-picked candidates are proclaimed the victors. "According to a senior U.S. administration official, the U.S. is likely to wait and see if unrest erupts in Panama before deciding what action to take," reported London's *Financial Times* April 27. "The use of force to remove [the commander of Panama's Defense Forces Gen. Manuel] Noriega has not been ruled out," added the *Times*. "There is a lot of opportunity for turmoil," said the administration official quoted by the London daily. The *Financial Times* added that the official drew "a parallel with the rigged Philippine elections in 1985, which led to the downfall of President Ferdinand Marcos."

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma warned April 24 that if the United States attempts a military attack, "we will reject it with all means at our disposal." Solís Palma charged that since the crisis began two years ago, the United States has carried out more than 700 acts of aggression against Panama, resulting in at least four Panamanians dead. General Noriega also warned that any aggression on the part of the United States "will be met on the same ground."

Solís Palma issued his warning during a televised speech, following reports that President George Bush had ordered the Central Intelligence Agency to undertake covert actions against Panama. *U.S. News and World Report* in its May 1 issue published an administration leak that the covert operation was ordered by Bush in February. Bush authorized \$10 million for the CIA to fund the anti-Noriega Civic Democratic Opposition Alliance (ADO-C) electoral campaign and other operations, including a clandestine radio and television network run by American intelligence operative Kurt Frederick Muse, who was arrested by Panamanian authorities

April 6, and is now facing a possible 10-year jail sentence for "conspiring against the security of the Panamanian state."

"It is evident that the United States wants to destroy the government of Panama and to install a puppet government" willing to renegotiate the Carter-Torrijos canal treaties, said Solís Palma.

"By giving \$10 million to the Panamanian opposition just two weeks before the elections, the government of the United States proves its immoral and evil intent, of adopting the embarrassing, illegal, and anti-democratic practice of buying votes to insure the election of candidates compliant with U.S. interests," he said. The U.S. plan, charged the Panamanian President, "is to plunge Panama into violence and chaos as soon as the May 7 elections are concluded," and "is a test case that will be applied later to all of Latin America."

The plan is to set off strikes and street disturbances in Panama, in the likely event of a victory by pro-government presidential candidate Carlos Duque, who has said that he will retain Noriega as commander of the PDF. This turmoil is intended to cause a bloody confrontation with the PDF, to provide an excuse for U.S. military action.

This plan was first presented in a December 1987 speech at George Washington University by former U.S. National Security Council official Norman Bailey. Arguing that the issue was not only to get rid of Noriega, but of the entire Panamanian Defense Force, Bailey said that that would only happen if the opposition provoked a "bloodbath" in the presence of American TV cameras.

Other actions under consideration are adding a trade embargo to the current U.S. economic sanctions, and arm-twisting the nations of Ibero-America to join the U.S. in declaring the elections fraudulent and suspending diplomatic ties with Panama.

U.S. interference

Showing open disregard for the wishes of the Panamanian electorate, the administration is attempting to dictate who the winners should be even before the votes are cast. Secretary of State James Baker III stated April 28 that the U.S. government will not respect the election results, no matter how clean. Said Baker, "As long as General Noriega remains in power, there will not be any improvement in relations between the United States and Panama. There will not be a normalizing of relations." Baker made his statement after meeting with Eric Delvalle, whom the United States still claims is "the President of Panama." The same day, President Bush declared in Clearwater, Florida, "The people and the government of the United States will not recognize fraudulent election results engineered by Noriega." The administration is demanding that Panama accept "impartial" U.S. observers to monitor the elections, and even the vote counting, which is against Panamanian electoral laws. One such "impartial" observer proposed by the administration is Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar (R), who led a similar delegation in the U.S. operation to oust President Marcos from the Philippines, and who has called for military action against Noriega.

Panama has indicated that it would welcome an observer delegation led by former President Jimmy Carter, so long as it is willing to abide by Panamanian law.

U.S. backing drug mob

The administration's claim that it is going after Noriega because "he is a drug runner," was proven to be a hoax after the illegal U.S. campaign contributions to the opposition were uncovered. The *New York Times* reported April 25 that officials of the U.S.-financed ADO-C "indicated that they had used some of the American money to buy the 10 minutes of prime-time coverage" on Panama's RPC television network. RPC television is owned by the multimillionaire brothers Fernando and Carlos Eleta Alamarán. Carlos Eleta Almarán has been languishing in a Georgia jail since April 6, charged with conspiring to smuggle 600 kilos of cocaine per month, with a street value of \$300 million, into the United States. The drug profits were intended to finance the opposition's campaign.

The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reported April 22 that Eleta's arrest is "a serious setback" for the American-financed electoral alliance.

Eleta's arrest will "affect the elections," said his attorney, Barry Slotnick, who said his client "has been a primary fighter for a return to democracy in Panama." Also shaken by Eleta's arrest was Jennie Lincoln, who is organizing the Carter delegation of observers for Panama's elections. Dr. Lincoln complained that the detention of Eleta would bring an end to his TV station's "objective" coverage of the opposition's electoral campaign.

Further underlining the hypocrisy behind the Eastern Establishment's anti-Noriega campaign, were two editorials in

the *New York Times* April 25. The first, while critical of the Bush administration's "cowboy" methods, said that Noriega had to go because of his alleged involvement in drug trafficking. Right underneath its anti-Noriega editorial, the *Times* ran another editorial, this one calling for the legalization of drugs: "Good or bad, marijuana is here to stay. The billions spent to fight it are wasted dollars. Indeed, they may be worse than wasted: properly regulated, marijuana might serve as a less dangerous substitute for alcohol."

Opposition crumbles

The dismantling of Muse's clandestine broadcasting network, Eleta's arrest on drug-trafficking charges, and the revelations of CIA financing have begun to crack the ADO-C alliance. The alliance's base is openly complaining that the leadership denied them campaign funding, even while they were getting millions from the United States. ADO-C legislative candidates in Colon, Panama's second largest city, which the opposition had once claimed as a stronghold, issued a document charging that the leadership was adopting an "ill-conceived attitude of victory" before the elections.

The document, signed by most of the ADO-C legislative candidates in Colon, accused the alliance's second vice presidential candidate, banker Guillermo "Billy" Ford, of being a racist and charged that the alliance leaders were plotting to "cause a bloodbath in Colon to taint the elections and provide an excuse for the policy of the U.S. State Department." This, they said, "we will not allow."

The probability that the pro-government National Liberation Coalition (COLINA) will win the May 7 elections has increased in the face of the stated intention of the United States to rescind the Carter-Torrijos canal treaties. The most recent signal that the treaties may be annulled was put out by New Right gadfly Phyllis Schlafly. "It's time to declare the 1978 Panama Treaty a non-treaty, admit our country's most costly diplomatic mistake and stand up for our national security interest," she wrote in her syndicated column, published by the *Washington Times* April 27. "This may be a costly move, but the cost of not making it will be even higher. Cowardice and failure of leadership are always expensive."

While Schlafly's ravings could easily be dismissed, Panamanians are aware that there is currently a bill before the U.S. Congress, sponsored by Rep. Phil Crane (R-Ill.) and 26 others, that would accomplish what she proposes: tearing up the treaties.

Not surprisingly, hundreds of thousands of Panamanians are rallying behind Noriega, to defend the nation against foreign aggression. On April 21, some 350,000 people marched in Panama City—which has a total population of slightly more than 1 million—in support of Noriega and the PDF. The march, under the slogan "Friends of the PDF," was led by the COLINA presidential candidate Carlos Duque. Reuters reported April 25 that it "was the largest pro-government rally in recent memory."