

Noriega backed by 150 of continent's lawmakers

by Carlos Wesley

Over the June 17-18 weekend, 150 senators and congressmen from 15 Ibero-American nations held the first "Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama." The conference was the first time that Ibero-American lawmakers had come together at their own initiative for an event of this nature, and was convened to demonstrate continental solidarity with Panama and the commander of its Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega. In addition, the gathering of the 150 parliamentarians, representing 48 different political parties, was "the first step in the history of the Americas towards establishing Latin America's effective sovereignty," said Brazilian Congressman Tadeu França in a speech delivered June 19, on his return to Brazil's House of Representatives.

The conference was a direct response to the capitulation of the governments of Ibero-America to the United States at the Organization of American States (OAS) special foreign ministers meeting on May 17. On that occasion, the governments sold out to the Bush administration's promises of debt relief, or surrendered to its strong-arm pressures, and passed a resolution demanding that the Panamanian government be dissolved and condemning Noriega. Unlike their governments' executives, the legislators, who are closer to the electorate, have a better understanding of the political costs of betraying Panama.

A big hole was also blown into the media propaganda against Panama as a result of the lawmakers' meeting. Throughout Ibero-America the headlines reflected the reality that "Noriega is a nationalist leader," and that the fight between the United States and Panama is about who is going to control the Panama Canal in the year 2000. But the U.S. major media blacked out all news of the conference.

For weeks beforehand, the U.S. State Department deployed every diplomatic and intelligence asset at its disposal

in a desperate attempt to prevent the conference from taking place. The CIA, the Socialist International, the international Christian Democracy, all pressured parliamentarians not to attend. Even the United States Information Service (USIS), which otherwise spends its time singing the praises of Gorbachov, deployed its personnel on a Sunday in order to give the "proper spin" to reports of the event.

But once again, as has often been the case with its handling of Panama, this arrogant and high-handed approach backfired. "We are aware that to support our country . . . you have had to see beyond the worldwide campaign of disinformation. You have had to stand up to the threats of the U.S. government," said the president of Panama's Legislative Assembly, Celso Carrizo, to the visitors.

The result, as has been widely reported in the Ibero-American media, is that Panama's position has been bolstered. "Without a doubt, the government of Panama and Gen. Manuel Noriega have just won significant support in their hot confrontation with the United States over policy and the isthmian canal," reported the Dominican Republic's *El Nacional* on June 21. In the article, titled "Noriega Gets Solid Support," *El Nacional* says that "lawmakers from 14 countries [the 15th was the host country—ed.] who met in Panama, declared their solidarity with the positions of the current Panamanian government and warned the OAS that in its handling of the crisis that is affecting that nation, it should abide by its own founding charter."

One reason for success, was that the 150 legislators who attended arrived with proof in hand that they represented even broader forces, in the form of a "Manifesto in Defense of Panama" signed by more than 500 senators and congressmen from all over the hemisphere. These signatures, said Brazilian Sen. Aluizio Bezerra—author of the initiative—as he

handed the signed manifesto to Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma during the opening ceremonies, "prove that the entire effort by the American media to diminish the figure of your country's leader has not been enough to undermine the support and solidarity" of Latin America for Panama. "The cause of Panama is the cause of Latin America," said Senator Bezerra, of the centrist PMDB party, Brazil's largest.

Another dramatic moment came when the Ecuadorian delegation presented Solís Palma with a copy of a resolution adopted by the Congress of Ecuador, June 15 (see below), demanding U.S. compliance with the 1977 Carter-Torrijos canal treaties and condemning U.S. interference in Panama's internal affairs. The significance of the resolution is that it was a call to attention to Ecuador's foreign minister, Diego Cordovez, one of the chief negotiators of the OAS mission sent to resolve the "Panamanian crisis." Following the most recent OAS visit to Panama, June 12-14, Cordovez suggested that U.S. interference is blocking a solution. "Foreign forces are creating pressure so that no solution is found to the Panamanian conflict," he said, according to press reports published June 18.

Cordovez, the press reported, was miffed by an ultimatum issued by Vice President Dan Quayle during his recent Central American tour, that either the OAS oust Noriega, or the U.S. would have to consider stronger measures against Panama. Quayle's ultimatum was delivered while the OAS mission was still in Panama negotiating, which undermined their effectiveness, as they came to be seen not as impartial negotiators, but as U.S. stooges.

Rodrigo Borja, Ecuador's President, also backtracked somewhat in public statements from his previous anti-Noriega hard line. Radio reports monitored in Colombia June 22, say that Borja's softening "came about as a result of the conference of lawmakers in support of Panama."

In their final declaration, "The Year 2000 Will Find Us United," the legislators announced the formation from their ranks of an Ad Hoc Commission to continue the battle for the sovereignty of Panama upon their return to their countries, with three specific immediate tasks: to reverse the capitulation of the OAS, to see Panama reintegrated into the "Group of Eight" Ibero-American countries, and to turn the Latin American Parliament "into an effective mechanism of pressure towards the United States, in favor of Panama." (See Final Declaration, below.)

Bankers' democracy

The leader of Panama's parliament, Celso Carrizo, opened up by presenting the lawmakers with a picture of the reality confronting Ibero-America: the imposition of a bankers' dictatorship in the name of democracy. Our nations, he said, have been deliberately impoverished, "making them victims of an unpayable foreign debt that can only be paid in installments of endless human misery, which is still not enough to cover the growing interest on principal that remains the same

size, even though it has been paid several times over. That is another form of condemning our nations to be always dependent," he said. "And it is done in the name of glorious democracy . . . of the type that the U.S. now wants to impose upon us."

President Solís Palma immediately followed, stating that Panama is the victim of the new geopolitical arrangements between the United States and the Soviet Union. "You have arrived in the country at a very special moment in the history of mankind and Latin America," he said. "A time when agreements between the superpowers have revived old concepts about conventional weapons and the strategic value of our territories."

Challenging the fictitious bankers' "democracy," Solís Palma said: "The famous decade of democratization is a sinister farce if we count the tens of thousands of political murders, the hundreds of thousands of victims of armed violence, the drop in real wages and in the standards of living of the majority of our countries." He warned, "It is extremely dangerous for a superpower to call itself a world judge and unilaterally determine when, where, and how human rights are to be respected or a democratic regime is to be established."

"As any other sovereign and free nation would have done," he said, "Panama has rejected and will firmly reject the intolerable behavior of the United States. This is why we are requesting the support of all people. We wish that our experience can alert them to what could befall each of them in the future, if we do not all unite in a strong general movement in defense of our inalienable rights."

Panama, he said, would never surrender Noriega, whom he described as the leader of the movement of Panamanian liberation. "To hand over Noriega, is to hand over the movement, because it would be the first step in dismantling the entire political structure that allows us to continue the great battle of Latin America. It is absolutely false, illusory, and misleading [to say] that General Noriega's departure would bring peace and stability." Only by lifting U.S. economic sanctions against Panama, can the process of reestablishing peace and stability begin, he said.

Challenging head-on the lie that Noriega is a drug kingpin, Solís Palma noted, "Since it was not appropriate to bring up charges of communism in the case of Panama, they decided to invent a new monster and they laid hands on the charges of drug trafficking. . . . In the entire international scandal that they have created, they have never once presented evidence admissible in a court of law. The keystone of the entire campaign of slander are statements from perjurers, from persons who are currently serving jail terms for drug trafficking and drug-money laundering in the U.S., where the reduction of sentences in exchange for testifying as the government wants has become an institution of the administration of justice."

Several of the lawmakers also addressed the conference. Besides Brazil's Senator Bezerra, speakers included Rep.

Miguel Nacul of Argentina, who led a delegation of almost 30 parliamentarians, most of them from the Peronist party of President-elect Carlos Menem. This was the largest delegation of Argentinian lawmakers ever to embark on a foreign mission.

Venezuela's President, socialist Carlos Andrés Pérez, the Bush administration's main man in Ibero-America in the push to oust Noriega, came in for some scathing criticism from his nation's delegation. Venezuelan Rep. Pablo Medina got a standing ovation from the assembled lawmakers when he said that Pérez's ambitions of becoming the great leader of the Third World had bit the dust once he betrayed Panama. "While the Pérez government criticizes democracy in Panama, in the four months since he came to power, he has sent troops into the streets on four different occasions, leaving a toll of more than 1,000 dead, while in Panama there have been five deaths due to political violence during the last three years," said Medina.

Noriega meets with legislators

There was keen awareness that every nation in the continent is facing "the Panama treatment" from a U.S. administration gone wild. General Noriega hammered away at this theme in an informal meeting with the lawmakers before the start of the formal sessions June 17. He said that his troubles started when the "arrogant" John Poindexter, then U.S. national security adviser, and since indicted for his role in the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages operation, came to Panama to demand that it serve as a base for military action against Nicaragua. "Panama said no, and that's when the aggression began, on Dec. 23 of 1985," said Noriega.

He spoke about Panama's late leader, Omar Torrijos, "whose most important legacy," he said, "was an armed forces that no longer belong to the oligarchy. . . . They belong to the people and will struggle for the people." Noriega equated Panama's fight for the canal to Argentina's struggle to reestablish its sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands and Brazil's fight to retain the Amazon. Addressing the "brothers from Brazil," he said, "Imperialism is also concerned about what you may do with the Amazon. And they are already worried about what will be done to the piranhas. But they must understand that Brazil can do whatever it wants to do with its own piranhas." He warned the delegates from Argentina that "you must sleep with both eyes open to keep the imperialists from preventing President-elect Menem from taking office."

Brazilian Congressman França summed up his experiences at the conference in his report to Brazil's House of Representatives on June 19. "All of us Latin American lawmakers were able to assess up close the humiliation of a subjugated country." The Latin American nations, he said, are discovering they are the "victims of a single process of Yankee domination, capable of detaching the Amazon with the same ease with which the British victory in the Malvinas was accomplished."

Final Declaration

'The year 2,000 will find us united'

We, the participants in the Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama, meeting June 17 and 18, 1989 in Panama City,

Whereas:

1. We accept as our own the manifesto, "Against Intervention in Panama," signed by more than 500 parliamentarians from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and also accept the terms of the Resolution of the Ecuadorian National Congress and the Declaration of the Bolivian Delegation to this conference.

2. We have confirmed that the conflict in Panama is the result of economic pressures and the increase of United States troops and military equipment in Panama, and that the international campaign of disinformation and defamation corresponds to the obvious and repeatedly expressed interest of the United States Government in abrogating the agreements sanctified in the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties.

3. The resolutions adopted to date by the Organization of American States on Panama's case have not contributed to respect for the free right of self-determination of peoples as set forth in the United Nations Charter and in its own charter.

4. We attest, and denounce, that United States military intervention in Panama infringes upon the exercise of fundamental rights, particularly free transit through its own territory and freedom of the press.

5. We believe that the above violates Panamanian sovereignty and endangers the self-determination, integration and peace of the entire Latin American continent.

Therefore:

I. We demand that the United States faithfully comply with the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, signed in 1977, especially in regard to:

a) The transfer of canal installations and administration to the Panamanian people.

b) The withdrawal of military bases from Panamanian territory.

c) The suspension of economic, political and diplomatic measures against Panama.

II. We ask the member countries of the Organization of American States (OAS) to reject any type of pressure that may lead them, in the case of Panama, to make resolutions which contradict the principles set forth in its own charter.

III. We call upon the governments of the "Group of Eight" countries to reintegrate Panama into the group.

IV. We declare that we have created among the participants of this meeting an ad hoc commission which will fundamentally serve to:

a) Promote compliance with the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties by means of public campaigns.

b) Counteract the campaign of disinformation and defamation against Panama.

c) Bring this declaration before the Latin American Parliament so that this organization, in accordance with its basic principles, will become an effective mechanism of pressure towards the United States, on Panama's behalf.

Signed by 150 Latin American parliamentarians from 15 countries, representing 47 political parties.

Ecuador National Congress resolution

The plenary of the legislative commissions, considering:

● That the Government and People of Panama have been the object of a permanent aggression and threat of interven-

tion on the part of the United States for the past several years;

● That this entire campaign is directed at revising the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, seeking thereby to prolong the presence of military bases in that country beyond the year 2000; and

● That it is the duty of the National Congress to defend the sovereignty and right to self-determination of peoples.

Agrees:

1. To express solidarity to the Panamanian People and Government, today under attack and threatened by foreign military intervention;

2. To condemn the United States' interference in the internal affairs of Panama, which violates the principle of self-determination of peoples; and,

3. To call upon the Governments of Panama and the United States to faithfully and fully comply with the Torrijos-Carter Treaties.

Quito, June 15, 1989

(signed)

Nicolás Issa Obando, President of the National Congress
Dr. Carlos Jaramillo Díaz, General Secretary

U.S. goofs in Panama

A major gaffe was committed by the U.S. military Southern Command when its soldiers detained 150 senators and representatives from the national Congresses of 15 nations, who were in Panama participating in the "Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama." The detention of the lawmakers, widely publicized by Ibero-America's news media, led to widespread condemnation of the U.S. government for its "arrogant behavior" and its violations of the 1977 Panama Canal treaties. In Ibero-America, not only do elected representatives enjoy immunity from search or arrest, but the lawmakers charge that they were "intimidated, insulted, and subjected to offensive" behavior by the U.S. soldiers.

The incident occurred on June 18 as the lawmakers and an entourage of journalists were on their way to the Panamanian town of Veracruz, located near Howard Air Force Base of the U.S. Southern Command. A Panamanian highway which passes through the base provides the only access to Veracruz. When the buses carrying the lawmakers passed through the base, U.S. soldiers stopped the caravan, accusing the passengers of "taking photographs in a restricted area." When the lawmakers protested that they were in Panamanian territory, and that the troops were denying them the right to free passage, guar-

anteed in the Panama Canal treaties, one of the soldiers denied that right existed. "You may be in Panama, but this is a U.S. military base and it does not belong to you," she stated.

The soldiers offered to let the lawmakers continue, but not four major Brazilian journalists (Neri Vitor, Dilimar Francou, Cesar Moura Damota, and Ascanio Aurelio) nor Panamanian newspaperman Luis Aurelio. When that offer was rejected, the soldiers detained the entire group for almost an hour, until U.S. military officers of higher rank agreed to allow them to continue.

Venezuela's largest daily, *Ultimas Noticias*, ran this headline on June 19: "U.S.A. Troops Carry Out Aggression Against Venezuelan Lawmakers in Panama." Similar headlines appeared throughout Ibero-America and Europe.

The State Department contributed to the ill will by insisting that the soldiers were justified in mistreating the lawmakers. The troops had the right to detain them, "because they were on United States military territory," asserted the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela in a statement issued June 19, even though the incident took place on a highway which, according to the canal treaty, is not restricted, and belongs to Panama.

Only the Venezuelan government of Carlos Andrés Pérez took the U.S. side in the incident, in a June 19 Foreign Ministry statement saying the lawmakers themselves were to blame "for arguing with the soldiers."