

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. maneuvers simulate invasion

President Bush talks of "friendly invasions," but the provocations against Panama are not exactly friendly.

The U.S. forces in Panama staged "command-wide" exercises on Aug. 17, involving the Army, Navy, and Air Force, with a massive array of military hardware. The troops secured the 10 military bases the United States maintains in Panama, and rumbled through Panama City in armored personnel carriers and tanks during the exercises, described by the Pentagon as the largest conducted by the U.S. Southern Command since the Bush administration stepped up its war of nerves last July against the Panamanian government and Gen. Manuel Noriega.

The exercises were the latest in a series of provocations by the Bush administration in the last few weeks, which have heightened concern in Ibero-America that the United States is on the brink of becoming mired in a new Vietnam-style war in Panama that could involve other nations on the continent. On Aug. 11, a shooting war almost broke out between Southcom and the Panamanian Defense Forces, after Panamanian traffic police detained several private vehicles carrying heavily armed American soldiers in civilian clothing.

Several Ibero-American sources fear the Bush administration may see the possibility of an easy military victory in Panama as a cheap way of restoring the U.S. image as a great power, after its appeasement of the hostage-takers in the Middle East. The Reagan-Bush administration's 1983 invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, say these sources, also followed the U.S. do-nothing response to the terrorist bombing-mas-

sacre of 250 Marines in Lebanon.

The attacks against Panamanian sovereignty were carried out under the cover of administration's so-called war on drugs. At a news conference Aug. 15, President Bush maintained that he had "an obligation" to kidnap General Noriega. "We have an indictment out against General Noriega for drug trafficking," said Bush. "I am not saying what I would do or wouldn't do, but there was a case where a man named Younis was apprehended and brought to justice," he said, referring to the 1987 capture of Lebanese airliner hijacker Fawaz Younis by U.S. authorities.

Bush also announced that the U.S. military will carry out "friendly invasions" of other nations to fight drugs. This confirmed repeated warnings made by the Panamanian government that the American attacks against it were a test case to be applied to all the nations of the hemisphere.

As to how "friendly" the invasion would be, Los Angeles Police Chief Darryl Gates, who helped the Bush administration develop the plans, said that the Ibero-Americans are doing "a lousy job" fighting drugs. "They need help . . . but once again, the bottom line has to be that they do something about it, and if they don't, we will."

But few in Ibero-America were buying the administration's cynical ploy of destroying national sovereignty in the name of a war on drugs. "The Green Berets should invade Los Angeles and New York and other American cities where drugs are sold on street corners and openly consumed," said Colombian Foreign Minister Julio Londoño. "Colombia, more than

any other country, has paid and continues to pay a high cost in the war against drug trafficking." Even as he spoke, the drug traffickers assassinated yet another Colombian judge and a policeman.

In fact, the United States is the world's number-one producer of marijuana.

Panamanian sources noted that the U.S. drug indictment against Noriega was fabricated long after the U.S. government determined to get rid of him in a shameless bid to keep the Panama Canal and the American military bases in Panama past the year 2000, when they must revert to Panama according to the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Canal Treaties.

In fact, they said, the Bush administration's war against Panama has served to protect drug money-laundering, drug trafficking, and "to promote the growth of a narco-oligarchy in Latin America." The Bush administration came to the defense of the Panamanian Broadcasting Company (RPC) after the government attempted to crack down against it on Aug. 16 for failing to pay \$5 million in taxes. RPC is owned by the Eleta brothers, Carlos and Fernando, Panama's wealthiest family. In April of this year, Carlos Eleta, who at the time was working with the U.S. government to bring down Noriega, was arrested in Macon, Georgia for conspiring to bring 600 kilos a month of cocaine, valued at \$300 million, into the United States.

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma noted, in an article published by the Mexican daily *Unomásuno* on July 28, that while the United States has tried to shut down Panama's banking center, arguing that it launders drug money, "the more than \$20 billion that left Panama in the last two years ended up in banks in Miami, where they changed the laws to take deposits without too many questions."