

Americans transformed by truth about Panama

by Carlos Wesley

General Manuel Noriega, Commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), welcomed a delegation of 120 Americans to Panama on a fact-finding tour. The group participated in a conference on U.S. aggression against Panama on Nov. 27-29, sponsored by the Panamanian Center for International Studies. Noriega told the delegates that Panama was willing to sit down at the table for face-to-face, direct negotiations, without intermediaries, with the United States government, "to discuss anything . . . to discuss development planning, and the defense of the continent if it's necessary."

He told the American farmers, retired military officers, clergymen, labor leaders, political activists, academics, and journalists, that he was grateful for their presence, "because we are not interested in the news put out by the newspapers but that carried from people to people." The Panamanian leader told the delegates that he wanted those "who come from the American people, to realize that we are another people with our own reality, and that reality has been deformed and distorted" by U.S. media reports.

He said that he and Panama had been at the forefront of the war against drugs, long before it became a popular issue in the U.S. "When the U.S. was getting no support from any nation against drug trafficking, it was here in Panama, in 1972, where for the first time a confederation of nations was established to work on a strategy to repress drug trafficking. And we have the letters from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration where they give recognition to Panama's struggle" against drugs, he said.

Although committed to learn the truth about Panama for themselves, many of the American delegates had a skeptical attitude toward the Panamanian government, particularly toward Noriega, portrayed by media as "a drug-pushing dictator," hated by most Panamanians. "When I came down I had some doubts about Noriega," said Gerald Kopp from North Dakota, "but after I heard him speak about Christianity and science, I am convinced that he is a good leader."

After tours, briefings by Panamanian officials at which frank questioning was encouraged, and unscheduled exchanges with ordinary Panamanian citizens, the majority of the visitors became convinced that Bush administration policy towards Panama is causing damage to U.S. long-term interests, not only in Panama, but in all of Ibero-America,

and that if this continues, the U.S. could see itself embroiled in a new Vietnam-type war.

U.S. military aggression

One of the things that most surprised the delegates was the extent of U.S. military aggression against Panama. They were denied access to the Miraflores Locks of the Panama Canal, a major tourist attraction, by armed guards employed by U.S. authorities, under the pretext of a non-existent bomb threat. Throughout their travel in the area around the canal, the delegates saw U.S. troops in combat gear, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and barbed wire. They saw U.S. troops deployed in areas forbidden by the 1977 Panama Canal treaties, said Oklahoma farmer and U.S. senatorial candidate George Gentry.

The delegates found out that most Panamanians, traditionally friendly towards the U.S., are becoming increasingly anti-American, and that they are willing to risk their lives to defend their country against what they perceive as American aggression. "I spoke to a fellow just now," said Mississippi farmer Wayne Johnston, "and he told me he doesn't much like Noriega, but he likes what the U.S. is doing here even less."

One delegate, Texan anti-abortion activist David Hall, abandoned the official tour and hired a taxi on his own for an unscheduled visit to the city of Colón, the Caribbean terminus of the Panama Canal. "There is a lot of poverty," said Hall, who added that he believed that the conditions of the inhabitants of Colón have been worsened by the U.S. economic sanctions against Panama, which have decreased government revenues by more than 50%.

During a briefing by President Rodríguez, the delegates learned that the U.S. military has been deployed on several occasions to occupy Panama's main water purification plant, which supplies not only most of Panama's population, but also the Americans who live there.

One of the highlights of the conference came at closing ceremonies, when Rabbi Gerald Kaplan of Brooklyn, New York, presented Noriega with an old Bible that once belonged to victims of Hitler's concentration camps, and with a yarmulka. He read a special prayer to the leaders of Panama "for their determination toward keeping the light of freedom burning for the people of Panama." Rabbi Kaplan cited the words of poet Hillel: "I looked for my God, but he eluded me. I looked for my soul but it eluded me. I looked for my brother, then found all three."

In the end the delegates adopted, with just one dissenting vote, a declaration drafted by Roger Green, Democratic member of New York's State Assembly, expressing "outrage" over the Bush administration policies toward Panama, particularly over the economic sanctions "which have brought undue hardships, particularly on the poor and the working poor." The declaration states that the buildup of U.S. troops in Panama "serves as a provocation and increases destabilization throughout the Central American region."