

Panama massacre: the real story

by Carlos Wesley

In the dawn hours of Dec. 20, the largest military force deployed by the United States since the Vietnam War was ordered by President George Bush to illegally invade the tiny Central American nation of Panama. Eventually Bush would commit 26,000 troops, armed with the most sophisticated of weapons, including the supersecret F-117 Stealth aircraft, to annihilate the 4,500 combatants of the Panamanian Defense Forces, and the several thousand irregulars of the Dignity Battalions and the Committees for the Defense of the Fatherland (CODEPADI). He would also deploy a propaganda machinery that would have made Goebbels envious, to wage psychological warfare—against the American public.

Before the invasion, and in the days following, the U.S. media failed to inform the public about what was occurring in Panama, instead emitting a barrage of disinformation and outright lies. What was billed as a “surgical strike” to capture Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, head of Panama’s government and commander of its defense forces, turned into a massacre of the civilian population.

Hours after the invasion began, Panama’s President Francisco Rodríguez told a news conference, “The new military aggression which began at dawn today has caused more than 60 deaths and several hundred injured, most of them civilians. The aggression took place particularly in the densely populated Chorrillo neighborhood, where very poor people live, and which is still burning. . . . And the most absurd thing is that it is surrounded by U.S. armed forces which do not even allow the Red Cross to enter to give aid to the victims.”

Rodríguez spoke on the afternoon of Dec. 20, by which time, according to Bush’s propaganda apparatus, the Panamanian resistance should have collapsed. Instead PDF troops, Dignity Battalions, and ordinary citizens were mounting a fierce resistance and preparing for a long guerrilla war. At this point, the American commanders called for reinforcements from Fort Ord in California and other U.S. bases. The estimates for “mop-up” operations, which the troops were told would take no longer than 24 hours, were revised, first to three days, then to five, then to “10-15 days,” and finally, they were saying it would take months to clean

up the resistance.

During that first day, the “Resistance Radio” network, linking the Radio Nacional, the state-owned network, and other radio stations, rallied Panamanians to defend the invaded homeland. Their reporters provided the only accurate reports of the invasion to the local populace and to foreign media seeking accurate information against the barrage of disinformation put out by CNN and other U.S. sources. “We have to get off the phone,” said one of the announcers who was briefing a caller on the evening of Dec. 20. “We are being bombarded by rockets fired by a helicopter gunship.” The station was destroyed. All of its employees were civilians.

On Friday, Dec. 22, the resistance forces, which were supposedly on the run, staged a spectacular mortar attack against Southern Command headquarters in Quarry Heights. They also attacked the Panama Canal Commission, and the Legislative Assembly, where the Bush-appointed collaborationist troika of Guillermo Endara, Ricardo Arias Calderón, and Guillermo “Billy” Ford, all of whom are linked to drug-money laundering (p. 32) had installed themselves. “U.S. intelligence was surprised by the readiness of some Panamanians to fight and die for their leader,” reported the London *Guardian* Dec. 22. The resistance shown by Panamanians has been “surprisingly bitter,” it said.

Population war

The fire fights continued on the 23rd and the early morning hours of Christmas Eve. However, on the same day Noriega requested asylum from the Vatican embassy in Panama, and the Panamanian government announced that it was suspending the armed resistance. What the Panamanians had not counted on was Bush’s “new kind of war”: against civilians. “The tactics Bush is using against Panama were invented by the Nazis in Hitler-Germany, the same ones of Stalin’s Russia, and the Chinese Communists,” said an Ibero-American diplomat at the United Nations. To minimize politically-damaging American casualties just before Christmas, the invasion force shelled PDF military installations, many of which were located in heavily populated areas, with mortar and artillery barrages, and carried out aerial bombardments of parts of Panama City.

Helicopter gunships fired indiscriminately at clusters of people, without regard to whether the targets were PDF soldiers, members of the Dignity Battalions, or just non-combatant civilians. The tactic, borrowed from Hitler’s armies, was to inflict heavy damage upon the civilian populace in order to break the will to resist among combatants. “It is just wanton murder,” said an American businessman with ties to the U.S. military in Panama.

The morgue of Santo Tomás Hospital was filled beyond capacity by Dec. 21. Chorrillo, where the PDF headquarters was located, was wiped off the face of the earth. Made up of wood tenement houses, built at the turn of the century, the

area burned to cinders under the U.S. bombings. Most of the inhabitants were poor, and black. Hundreds were left dead, thousands wounded, and 28,000 people homeless. The Bush administration said it was sending \$25,000 in emergency funds to help them.

This is "just like Hiroshima," said General Noriega in a taped radio broadcast on Dec. 23. In a statement given the same day to AFP, the French wire service, Noriega said that Bush had "caused great and useless killings," including losses to the American forces which were hidden from the U.S. public. "Every treaty of international law is being violated, and the international community should be terrified because all of these violations are being carried out in the name of a supposed defense of human rights," he said.

As in Chorrillo, the working-class township of San Miguelito was also heavily bombarded and strafed by the helicopter gunships. The particular viciousness shown by the invaders against San Miguelito was in part due to it being the center of most resistance from the citizen militias, the Dignity Battalions. But the bombs and the bullets did not discriminate between civilians and combatants, and the toll was heavy.

The city of Colón, with its largely black population, was also subjected to ruthless bombardment. The tenement known as "Fifteen Stories," a public housing project built by the government for low-income citizens, lost its top four floors after an aerial bombardment, an eyewitness reported by phone on Christmas Eve.

There was also the bombing of the PDF complex at Río Hato, carried out by the supersecret Stealths on Dec. 22. There, almost 100 teenagers perished, Nils Castro, in charge of international affairs for the PRD, Panama's ruling party until the invasion, told a press conference in Mexico City. They were students at the Tomás Herrera military high school.

In all, 5,000-7,000 Panamanians, mostly civilians, died during the invasion. "Nobody will ever know the exact number. Many people were buried in mass graves, others were burned, others have simply disappeared," said a former government official Dec. 26. "Everyone I know lost one or more relatives or a friend," said another Panamanian Dec. 28. "One of the drivers in my husband's union was killed, and my neighbor is still trying to locate her relatives who lived in Chorrillo," she said. "There are long lines at the morgues of people trying to find missing relatives," said another source Dec. 28.

Greatest tragedy of Panama's history

"You have to understand, there is nothing in our experience that could have prepared us for this. We have never lost anything close to this number of people," said one Panamanian interviewed Dec. 28. Even CNN has reported 2,000 deaths; given that Panama has only 2 million people, this would be equivalent to the United States losing 250,000 people—five times the American losses during the Vietnam

War. Yet Bush's propaganda machinery insists that "most Panamanians overwhelmingly welcomed the invasion."

Almost as bad as the killings, was the looting. "It was carried out by both rich and poor, not by the Dignity Battalions, as the U.S. media claim," said one Panamanian interviewed Dec. 26. "They came in their BMWs, in their Audis, and they were stealing just as the poor were doing." "I saw it with my own eyes. The middle class was also out there, looting, because they were afraid that they would end up without any food," said another source. Another witness said that she saw the mob approach a store with an acetylene torch to cut through the steel door. "As they started to cut the door, someone shouted, 'The Americans are coming!' and they all started running, until someone said: 'Hey! Why are we running? The Americans aren't going to do anything. This is Bush's Christmas present to us.' And they all returned to break down the store's door. The American armored column went past, and they didn't even pause to chase the looters away."

Not one business was left untouched in the central business district. Losses are estimated at \$1 billion, one-third of Panama's annual GNP. Insurance will not cover the losses because they are considered "due to an act of war." There are shortages of food and other necessities. "What I can't understand is why they didn't try to protect those areas they were occupying," said a pro-Noriega source about the U.S. troops. But the Marines did provide protection to the many foreign banks in Panama's offshore financial center.

Throughout the world, where the information was not as manipulated as that provided to Americans, there was widespread condemnation of the invasion and wanton murder. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution Dec. 29, denouncing the invasion as "a flagrant violation of international law," and calling on the U.S. to withdraw its occupation forces from Panama.

The reaction in Ibero-America was even stronger. Perhaps for the first time in its history, the Organization of American States approved a resolution condemning the United States. President Alan García of Peru withdrew his ambassador from the United States and called Congress into a special session to condemn the invasion. García also said that he would not recognize the quisling Endara government imposed by the "army of the invader." Mexico "firmly condemned the invasion," and even Bush's ally against Panama, Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, was forced to "condemn and reject" the U.S. military intervention.

The resistance in Panama is by no means over. The occupation forces and the Endara regime have embarked on a political persecution campaign against all potential nationalist leaders, pretending that "they served the Noriega regime." Thousands have been jailed, and many have been fired from their jobs. A Panamanian nationalist noted, "This will just increase the resistance. The U.S. might yet find itself faced with another Vietnam here in Panama."