

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. soldiers serve as drug couriers

George Bush figures out how to rid Panama of drugs: bring them home to the United States!

American servicemen sent to invade Panama are returning home with their duffel bags loaded with Colombian cocaine. CBS-TV reported on March 5 that at least one U.S. soldier and seven Colombians in the cocaine smuggling ring have been arrested.

One of the GIs confessed that he had paid up to \$10,000 to each of the soldiers he recruited as "mules" to smuggle the cocaine aboard returning military flights. CBS said that U.S. military officials claimed to have checked for drugs in the baggage of the returning 13,000 soldiers, "but the deployment was so large, it was almost impossible to search thoroughly."

The report recalled the Vietnam War era when the U.S. was flooded with drugs by returning servicemen who were victimized by CIA-allied Indochinese drug lords and corrupt officials. Experts date the beginning of the U.S. drug epidemic to that period.

It also peeled away another layer of the myth George Bush has sold to gullible Americans: that the Dec. 20 "war of tamales" against Panama was to fight drugs. Not only did the U.S. install a government in Panama made up of partners of the Colombian drug cartels, but it is now becoming obvious that it does not have a real case against Gen. Manuel Noriega, who is facing trial in Florida on trumped-up drug charges.

According to the *Wall Street Journal* March 5, "The government needs all the breakthroughs it can get in the case. . . . Prosecutors are relying heavily on the testimony of admitted

criminals. U.S. officials also haven't found any significant new evidence against Mr. Noriega in the millions of documents seized after the invasion." A senior administration official told the *Journal*, "We don't have the smoking gun we were looking for."

Lacking hard evidence, the government is scrambling for "witnesses" to create the impression that there was a so-called "Cuban connection" between Noriega, Fidel Castro, and the Colombian cocaine cartels. One of the new "witnesses" is former Panamanian Defense Forces Maj. Felipe Camargo, who is needed to corroborate the testimony of José Isabel Blandón. "Corroboration of Mr. Blandón's testimony is critical; prosecutors are concerned that the defense will unearth details of Mr. Blandón's bitter parting with Mr. Noriega and will impugn as vengeful Mr. Blandón's motive in testifying," according to the *Journal*.

Unfortunately for the prosecution, Maj. Camargo was part of Blandón's anti-Noriega cabal, and it should be just as easy for the defense to prove that his motives are equally vengeful. Another key prosecution witness, admitted drug money launderer Steven Kalish, "failed lie detector tests shortly after the original February 1988 indictment on an important financial aspect of the case, a government official says," according to the *Journal*.

Noriega's attorneys are asking that the case be dismissed because of the shocking circumstances under which he was arrested. "We believe it is impermissible for a nation to kill, wholesale, men, women and children to bring one man to trial," said attor-

ney John May.

Providing yet another glimpse into the administration's corrupt ties was Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger who described Panama's "Second Vice President," Guillermo "Billy" Ford, to the House Budget Committee on March 6 as "my close personal friend."

Ford was one of the co-owners of Dadeland Bank of Florida when it was used as a drug money laundromat by convicted drug dealer Antonio Fernandez in the mid-1980s. Eagleburger's connection may be one of the reasons Dadeland Bank has never been prosecuted despite several publicized cases of involvement in drug money-laundering. Dadeland Bank was "a central financial institution for one of the biggest Medellín launderers, Gonzalo Mora," reported the *New York Times* Feb 6.

Citing Ford, Eagleburger denied that the reason the U.S.-installed president of Panama, Guillermo Endara, is staging a hunger strike, is to protest the lack of economic assistance to rebuild Panama's war-torn economy. Endara's fast is "not aimed at the U.S.," he said.

But, according to Colombia's *El Tiempo* on March 6, the corpulent Endara says he has not gotten "anything, not even a buck," of the \$1 billion promised by Bush. "We got \$46 million, but that was Panamanian money held by the U.S. as part of the sanctions against Noriega. . . . This is creating an explosive situation."

Sources in Panama say Endara started his hunger strike March 1 to get popular support to stop a U.S. effort to dump him. Roberto Eisenmann, another co-owner of Dadeland Bank who is closely tied to the U.S., dismissed Endara as "a happy fatman whom nobody dislikes." But, warned Eisenmann, he should get back to work.