

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. arming Colombian mafias

Israeli weapons found at ranch of slain Colombian drug lord were part of Contra operations, reports suggest.

Official U.S. government agencies were more closely involved with the network that supplied Israeli weapons to the Colombian drug cartels than was first reported. Information now available indicates that individuals and agencies tied to the Iran-Contra drugs-for-arms operations, played a role in the illegal shipment of Uzi automatic weapons and Galil rifles from Israel found at the ranch of Colombian drug lord Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. Rodríguez Gacha died in a shootout with Colombian authorities last December.

The weapons were obtained in the spring of 1989 by Israeli Lt. Col. Yair Klein (ret.) for a group of Panamanians organized by the CIA to oust Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega. That group, led by Col. Eduardo Herrera, Panama's former ambassador to Israel who is now chief of police in the U.S.-installed government of Panama, was already undergoing training at a school Klein had set up in Colombia, according to reports published in Antigua. The school in Colombia, also used by Klein for "the training of groups of hired assassins of the Colombian drug cartels," according to the international police agency, Interpol, was already coming under the scrutiny of the authorities. So Klein, with the help of another Israeli, Maurice Sarfati, who had purchased a melon farm with U.S. government financial guarantees on the Caribbean nation of Antigua-Barbuda, tried to move his operations there.

Antiguan authorities sought to establish his bona fides before granting approval for the school, Spearhead Ltd., which Klein claimed would train

"VIP security guards." In an affidavit published by Antigua's *The Nation* on April 13, the former commander of the islands' 90-man defense forces, Lt. Col. Clyde Walker, said he met with Klein in January 1989 and prepared a report on Klein and on the staff listed on the brochures of the proposed school, all of whom were reserve officers in the Israeli Defense Forces. He then gave the report to CIA agent Robert Hogan in Antigua and to Hogan's superior, Robert Kenning, CIA station chief for the Eastern Caribbean, stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Barbados, with the request that the CIA conduct an "investigation into Spearhead Ltd. and the colonel and his trainers."

The CIA vouched for Klein and his operation, according to Walker, who said in his affidavit that he was told by station chief Kenning: "Spearhead appears to be all right."

Despite the CIA endorsement, Antigua said no, but by this time, March 1989, the weapons for the Panamanian anti-Noriega forces had been loaded at the Israeli port of Haifa aboard the Danish ship *Else TH*.

In an affidavit submitted to Antiguan authorities, published by *The Nation* on May 4, Klein said: "When I was informed that the training school was not approved I was most disappointed and shocked and had no other alternative but to divert the equipment to the Panamanian entity who paid for it. For the sake of clarity, the equipment consisted only of 200 Uzi and 200 Galil rifles which initially were intended for the Antigua Training School and were shipped to Panama. All costs for the transshipment were

paid by us from the Panamanian funds."

The weapons, which traveled aboard the *Else TH* accompanied by an officer of the Israeli Defense Forces, Eron Filip, were not transshipped to Panama. Instead, they were illegally off-loaded in Antigua and transferred to the *Sea Point*, a Panamanian-registered vessel, which delivered them to Colombia in April 1989 to drug lord Rodríguez Gacha.

Why did the CIA tell the Antiguan authorities Klein was "all right"? For one thing, the anti-Noriega operation headed by Colonel Herrera, an admitted employee of the CIA, was a project sanctioned by the U.S. government.

Klein was also one of the trainers of the U.S.-sponsored Nicaraguan Contras, according to reports published in Colombia. The Contra resupply operation, run by National Security aide Ollie North out of the Reagan-Bush White House, involved drugs-for-arms transactions, as has been proven in U.S. court proceedings. North and his Project Democracy operatives frequently obtained the weapons in Soviet bloc countries with the connivance of communist governments. This was demonstrated in 1986, when the Danish ship *Pia Vesta* was captured by Panamanian authorities with a cargo of weapons purchased in East Germany for the Contras.

Sources familiar with Klein say that Israel is being unfairly singled out in the case of Rodríguez Gacha. According to them, the 400-500 Israeli weapons at the ranch of the Colombian drug lord were but a small portion of thousands of weapons found there—enough to arm a medium-sized army—from the United States, Great Britain, France, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union.