

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Judicial terrorism

*The U.S. military dictatorship is holding thousands of citizens in jail without trial, including political prisoners.*

Only 7% of the people currently jailed in Panama have been convicted of committing a crime, according to a report from Panama's bar association published by the daily *La Estrella de Panamá* on April 21. That is to say, fully 93% of all the people in jail in Panama today are being held in preventive detention!

It's even worse for the political prisoners arrested for opposing the U.S. invasion ordered by George Bush on Dec. 20, 1989. Not a single one of them has been tried.

It was not until April 23 that the first trial of a political detainee was even announced. That was the case of legislator Elís Castillo, who, because of his congressional immunity, shouldn't be in jail, a fact acknowledged by the pro-government speaker of Panama's Congress, who has demanded Castillo's release.

Under Gen. Manuel Noriega, these gross violations of human rights that have become the norm under the new government installed and kept in power by the U.S. Armed Forces, did not exist. On would have to look at places such as Stalinist Russia, Red China, South Africa at its worst, or Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, to find a comparable use of preventive detention.

"Everyone who was connected to General Noriega is being persecuted," said journalist Escolástico Calvo in a telephone interview April 23. Calvo, the former publisher of the pro-Noriega newspapers *Crítica*, *Matutino*, and *La República*, was imprisoned for almost a year after the invasion. "There are no human rights here," he says.

"The former head of the Human Rights Commission, a doctor, Osvaldo Velásquez, was rewarded [by the U.S. puppet government of Guillermo Endara] with an appointment to a consulate in Switzerland." Velásquez's successor, Roberto Troncoso, *protested* because the government released Calvo on the humanitarian grounds of ill health.

On Jan. 3, 1990, almost two weeks after the invasion, "I was detained by the American soldiers and taken to a concentration camp where there were some 10,000 Panamanian detainees," Calvo says. "The Gringos came into my house and destroyed it. They put a tag on our wrists identifying us as 'prisoners of war.' I believe my tag number was 2485. . . . I had been collecting paintings by Panamanian artists and over the years they appreciated in value. I believe we are talking about \$400,000 worth of paintings . . . they took everything, perfumes, shoes, even my shirts . . . everything else was smashed.

"When I arrived at the concentration camp at Emperador, I had \$43 in my pockets. They gave me a receipt for that money. But when we went back to claim it, they told me it had disappeared. They came in like Attila the Hun, they just finished off this country.

"They told me I was on their most wanted list because, as the publisher of the pro-government newspapers, I had taken up the defense of Panama's sovereignty and independence. When they took me in, they offered me a deal: If I agreed to endorse the new government—sworn in at an American military base hours before the in-

vasion—they would let me go. I turned them down, and remained at the concentration camp without being charged with anything."

At the camp, there were only six latrines for 10,000 inmates. "You could only go to the toilet when they ordered you to," he says. At times "you had to wait two days. . . . The same thing for water. They would call you out for a head count five, six times a night, whether it was raining or not, because the concentration camp was in the middle of a jungle. Water for drinking came from a river there, so who knows what it contained. People left there with diarrhea and other diseases."

After a few days, Calvo was transferred to the custody of the new government. He was placed, without charges, at the Modelo jail, together with murderers, rapists, drug traffickers, and other hardened criminals. "That jail was built 50-60 years ago to hold 250 persons, but there are 1,300 inmates there now. I was in a cell with nine other persons, sleeping on the floor, in a space that was 5.7 meters by 2.7 meters . . . people were sleeping in the hallways, without a bed, next to the toilets which gave off such a strong smell you felt it in your throat."

Calvo is now out, but among those still at Modelo jail is Rigoberto Paredes, a university professor who is a former minister of planning and former legislator. He has been imprisoned for 16 months without a trial. Similarly, Benjamin Colamarco, the former head of the Dignity Battalions, remains in preventive detention, as do a number of former officers of the Panamanian Defense Forces.

"The U.S. has made a mistake in this country. The American people should realize that what was done to Panama was an infamy." U.S. citizens should pressure their government to rectify the situation before there is an explosion, says Calvo.