

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Two years of U.S. occupation

*Since President Bush imposed a U.S. military dictatorship, there are more drugs, more crime, and more corruption.*

**O**n Dec. 20, 1989, a reported 30,000 U.S. troops invaded Panama on orders from President George Bush to get Gen. Manuel Noriega, the commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces, whom the U.S. alleged to be involved with drug trafficking, and "to restore democracy." Two years later, those U.S. troops continue to occupy the country.

On Dec. 6, 1991, a U.S. Cobra combat helicopter hovered for several minutes above the Presidential Palace, the National University, and other public buildings. On Dec. 11, while the families of the civilian and military officials who have been held prisoner since the invasion were demonstrating outside Panama's Supreme Court, American MPs started handing out traffic tickets and a U.S. military truck came to remove the protesters' cars. When MP Troy C. Scott was asked by what authority he harassed Panamanians, he replied, "This is United States territory."

So, how have Panamanians—some 4,000 of whom were killed in the invasion according to most reliable estimates—fared, after two years of U.S. military occupation?

For one thing, 50% of the labor force is unemployed, and that's according to the U.S.-imposed Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderón. Another 20,000 people will be laid off in the next few months, to comply with the demands of Panama's creditors.

The man who really rules Panama, U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton, delivered what was, in effect, a State of the Union address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Panama on Dec. 11. Sounding like his boss Bush,

Hinton lashed into "those many Panamanians who, two years after the overthrow of Noriega's mafia, are so busy complaining about this and that, and criticizing this one and that one, that they have lost sight of the real and very great progress Panama has achieved and is achieving." Hinton said that new legislation would permit "a harsh economic program that would allow Panama to get rid of its arrears with international financial institutions and allow it to recover its credit reputation." He also announced that a free-trade agreement with the U.S. is being worked on.

To make Panama more "competitive," Hinton demanded an "open economy," and reducing wages and benefits for workers. The government just slashed social security benefits for retirees.

A U.N. report notes that the economy "has collapsed catastrophically" because of the invasion itself, the preceding two years of U.S. economic warfare, and the policies of the past two years.

"While Panama's situation must necessarily be seen in the context of the widespread poverty that prevails in Latin America," says the report, "the further deterioration of living conditions is a direct consequence of the invasion and of the existence within Panama's territory of two forces [the U.S. and the U.S.-installed government] interested in liquidating all vestiges of previous nationalism." The report, presented to the U.N. Economic and Social Council in Geneva toward the end of 1991, was first made known in the United States in an article published in Miami by journalist Enrique Maza, which

was reproduced by Panama's *La Cronica* on Dec. 18.

According to the U.N. document, "the governments of Panama and the United States are jointly persecuting the leaders and supporters of the former regime, and the suspected supporters of the former government and members of trade unions and universities, and other such institutions, which by their very nature could become a nucleus of civic protest and political opposition. Thus, the governments of Panama and the U.S. are linked in violating human rights, particularly the rights of trade unions and trade unionists," who face unemployment if they participate in protest or demonstrations, says the report.

In sum, the report says, "it can be affirmed that the governments of Panama and the U.S. are guilty of gross, intentional, and systematic violations of the U.N. Accord on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights against the Panamanian people."

Every day more information surfaces about corruption and illegal drug activities connected to U.S.-installed Panamanian President Guillermo "Porky" Endara and others in his government, including Vice President Guillermo Ford, and Ford's nephew, Jaime Ford Lara, manager of the Colón Free Trade Zone.

One recent scandal involves First Vice President Arias Calderón, also known as "The Mad Nun" for his holier-than-thou attitude, who was charged on Dec. 23 with collecting tens of thousands of dollars in illegal government payments. Then there are the 15,000 boxes of photos of officials and supporters of the current government purportedly found in Noriega's "secret archives." The photos, officials say, show politicians, diplomats, and businessmen connected to the Endara government, performing "deviant acts" and in "immoral poses."