

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Narco-regime used to blackmail Peru

The U.S.-installed government is stepping up political persecutions, as it floods Panama with drug money.

The Panamanian government of drug banker Guillermo Endara is demanding that Peru hand over businessman Carlos Wittgreen as the price for restoring diplomatic relations between the two countries. Wittgreen, a friend and associate of U.S. prisoner of war Gen. Manuel Noriega, has been locked up in a Peruvian jail since Feb. 8, while Peru's Supreme Court decides whether he will be extradited to Panama to face trial on charges of arson and murder.

The charges stem from an incident that occurred in May 1989, when unknown persons torched the yacht *Casimiro II*, which belonged to Gabriel Lewis Galindo, the man who ran the U.S. "Project Democracy" operation against Noriega. The yacht's security guard, a poor Panamanian named Félix Augusto Vásquez, was killed. It was not until more than one year later, in December 1990, that Wittgreen was indicted in Panama for the incident. The case lay dormant until September 1992, when Panamanian authorities, having been turned down by the Peruvian courts on an earlier request to extradite Wittgreen for "influence peddling," revived the yacht's case.

There are no witnesses against Wittgreen, nor is there any material evidence tying him to the crime. His only mistake was that he got into an altercation with the son of the yacht's owner, who made some offensive remarks about his friend General Noriega. It was Wittgreen's bad luck that the owner, Lewis Galindo, enjoys considerable influence in the United States, particularly among the min-

ions of the Inter-American Dialogue, the pro-drug legalization outfit that set the Bush administration's policy toward Ibero-America and continues to do so under Clinton.

Wittgreen's case has not been helped by the fact that Peru is particularly vulnerable at this time to blackmail pressures from Panama's puppet regime, because of the virtual economic choke-hold imposed against it by the U.S. embargo. U.S. officials such as the Inter-American Dialogue's Richard Feinberg, now with the U.S. National Security Council, are punishing Peru for alleged "human rights" violations, including taping the conversation between jailed narco-terrorist leader Abimael Guzmán, of Shining Path, and Red Cross officials. As if the U.S. government had not done exactly the same thing when it taped the telephone conversations between Noriega and his defense attorneys!

If the Peruvian government agrees to extradite him to Panama, Wittgreen would face a corrupt system of justice whose primary purpose is to hound the political opponents of the pro-drug government installed by the 1989 yuletide invasion ordered by George Bush. Scores of civilians and Panamanian Defense Forces officers who were taken prisoner by the U.S. invading forces, continue to languish in Endara's jails without a trial. Hundreds more have either gone underground or into exile—as in Wittgreen's case. Reliable estimates are that as many as 35,000 Panamanians are either political prisoners or are be-

ing persecuted for political reasons.

The rottenness of the system is shown by the case against columnist Luis de Janón, who was subjected to six hours of grueling interrogation by the Panama attorney general's office on March 3, for "conspiring against national security." Several of De Janón's co-workers, as well as his editor and publisher at *La Estrella de Panamá*, the oldest continuously published newspaper on the west coast of all the Americas, including the United States, face the same charges.

What makes this attack against the freedom of the press particularly egregious, is that the charges against De Janón are being brought by all the sitting justices on Panama's Supreme Court, to punish the journalist for publishing a particular bit of sleaze regarding Chief Justice Carlos Lucas López Tejada, a drug banker.

Reportedly, a few months ago, Lucas López had a traffic accident while driving under the influence of alcohol. The driver of the other vehicle, a local barber, was hauled into the Supreme Court, interrogated, tried, and convicted, and was ordered to pay damages. The court explained that it assumed the duties of a lowly traffic court, because only the Supreme Court can sit in judgment of one of its members. Further, it was not the chief justice but another member of the court, Justice Arturo Hoyos, who was driving the car involved in the accident, accompanied by his wife.

The latter is a particularly sore point for Lucas López, who was publicly accused of hiring a Colombian drug assassin to murder the husband of his mistress and her two children last Aug. 30. While all these charges have been aired by the tabloid press, when *La Estrella* published the drunk-driving allegations, this was seized as a convenient pretext to shut down the most important opposition medium.