

Stakes go up in the Panama crisis

by Carlos Potes

On July 31, 200,000 Panamanians marched in Panama City in support of the government and the Commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, who has been invited into exile by the U.S. government. The Reagan administration is determined to overthrow the present government of Panama, dismantle the Defense Forces, and hand power to what the *Miami Herald* characterized as the "BMW" oligarchic resistance movement.

The mass demonstration was in commemoration of the anniversary of the death of General Omar Torrijos, who took power from the Panamanian oligarchy in a 1968 coup, and left behind a popular national movement that General Noriega now leads. But the Reagan administration has determined that the bankers' revolution has already all but won.

Foreign intervention

On July 28, a week after the U.S. had cut off all military and economic aid to Panama, State Department spokesman Charles Redman called on "all Panamanians, and particularly government security officials, to avoid the use of force and violence," and the Reagan administration demanded that Panama "end all interruption or censorship of press reporting immediately."

The Panamanian government responded by characterizing such actions as "foreign intervention" in its internal affairs, and threatened to expel all U.S. diplomatic personnel, including Ambassador Arthur Davis, under the non-intervention clauses of the Vienna Convention.

General Noriega also threw the book at U.S. military forces in the Canal Zone, where satellite communications facilities have been installed without the authorization of the Congress and ratification of the President of Panama, as required by the Carter-Torrijos treaty of 1978, which mandates Panamanian sovereignty over the canal and all of its territory and facilities by the year 2000. The unauthorized installations have to go, announced the Panamanian government, and special privileges normally granted U.S. military

personnel in the Canal Zone were also suspended.

The present destabilization of Panama is run by the same crew that engineered the ousting of the Shah of Iran and, later, of President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, where strong U.S. allies against Soviet expansionism were sacrificed for the sake of quick deals with strange political bedfellows. Both "quickies" were run by the U.S. social democrats' "Project Democracy," or "parallel government," of Iran-Contragate fame; both gave Moscow strategic opportunities it could only have dreamed for.

'This is not the Philippines'

Apparently the U.S. government has reached the consensus that it can and must force General Noriega to resign, because it has been unable to bend him into compliance with its Contra antics in Central America and fears he may soon break away from the administration's insane economic policy. Since bankers and middle-class housewives have taken to the streets on the State Department's anti-Noriega cue, Washington is deluded that there is a growing popular movement against him in Panama. But, as Noriega himself pointed out only weeks ago, "This is not the Philippines, and I'm not Marcos."

Last July 22 Noriega told the Mexican daily *El Dia* that Panama "has not escaped the classic pattern of destabilization." The Project Democracy crowd in Washington has targeted him, he said, "because they want to destroy [the] Contadora [Group]. Panama has a policy of countering violence with dialogue, of seeking" a political solution in Central America "through the Contadora negotiating table, together with Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela. . . . They cannot accept Panama, a small and dependent country, having so much dignity and self-reliance."

On Panamanian TV July 19, Noriega said that "every time Panama makes a positive move in the search for peace, every time it does not align itself with certain directives, the country is attacked and its leaders must withstand disturbances. All this operates in unison. Insult precedes plotting. Had we been a silent country, if Panama had not been a member of Contadora, and if its leaders had been yes-men, its leaders and people would not encounter difficulties."

Noriega was referring to pressures by such Project Democracy operatives as ex-National Security Adviser Adm. John Poindexter, and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, both of whom used Lt. Col. Oliver North for their insane dirty work in Central America. Abrams flew to Mexico and Colombia during the week of July 20, to seek support against Noriega, because of the latter's insistence that the Central American military help design a peace strategy for the region. It was Poindexter who first demanded that Noriega—an obstacle to U.S.-Soviet plans for a Thirty Years War in Central America—disappear. Though Poindexter is out and may go to jail, his criminal policy toward Panama is now hegemonic in the U.S.

The 'Peru syndrome'

Perhaps an even more important reason, however, to oust Noriega and the Panamanian government is the Project Democracy crowd's fear that Noriega, with support of the black and Indian majorities, could lead the country with the highest per capita foreign debt in Ibero-America to adopt bold unilateral solutions to the debt problem, such as Peru's Alan García called for two years ago when he said that Panama should be the focal point for creating a regional "debtors' club." Noriega's potential to do that is one of the reasons the bankers who now run Washington are so desperate to remove him from the scene.

Noriega said already, in his July 22 *El Dia* interview, that "what's going on in Panama is economic asphyxiation . . . within whatever dissatisfaction there is in the countries of Latin America, and I say this specifically about Panama, the largest component is the foreign debt. . . . The economic situation is always a factor of asphyxiation, fuel for political conflagration. . . . Panama is dependent on the United States, as far as debt is concerned. . . . The solution is to seek a methodology to arrange, adjust, stretch out everything related to the foreign debt."

At the same time the ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party has called for reversing the austerity policies of the last two years, which have been dictated by the World Bank and which the Reagan administration insists on adhering to, together with its absurd Contra policy. The recent nationalization by Peru of all banks and insurance companies further feeds bankers' fears that Panama may be the next Ibero-American country to join the growing consensus for a break with the creditor banks—mostly U.S. banks.

Díaz Herrera rants no more

All the latest efforts to stir up the "bankers' revolution" against the Panamanian government (the loudest voices in the Panamanian "opposition" belong to the speculators' ring that has made Panama a haven for drug-money launderers) have hinged on incoherent denunciations by psychotic Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera, a follower of Indian-Argentinian gnostic guru Sathi Sai Baba. Díaz Herrera has been accusing Noriega for some two months now of conspiring to kill former Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos, among other alleged crimes, because "Torrijos's ghost" told him so.

On July 27, 7 a.m., special forces of the Panamanian police went to Col. Díaz Herrera's home, to bring him in for questioning on his accusations against Noriega. Three weeks earlier the U.S. government had demanded that Panamanian President Eric Delvalle investigate Díaz Herrera's wild charges, but when the Attorney General was finally ordered to do so, the mad colonel refused to testify. After quickly subduing Díaz Herrera's well-armed private army, the police carried the colonel off to the Attorney General's office, where he finally stated, at 9 a.m.: "I can produce no proof whatsoever."

Oddly enough the U.S. press, previously so quick to open its pages to Díaz Herrera's ravings, took several days to report his latest confession. What the colonel did tell the Attorney General, however, according to the daily *La Estrella de Panama*, is that Torrijos's murder had been ordered by President Reagan and Vice-President Bush, and carried out by Gen. Wallace Nutting of the U.S. Army Southern Command, who used Cuban exiles on the CIA payroll for the "job." Now the Reagan administration, which long acted as if Díaz Herrera were the only source of truth in Panama, seems to want him to shut up. Following weeks of building Díaz Herrera's credibility, *The Washington Post* suddenly turned on him by reporting the opinion of "impartial diplomats" that he is "mentally unstable."

Wishful thinking

The biggest delusion fed by Washington's own propaganda mill is that General Noriega is "acting tough" out of desperation at an opposition supposedly spreading throughout Panamanian society. Even so, the *Christian Science Monitor* opined, July 29: "When the going gets tough, sometimes the tough just get tougher."

The Washington Post inquired, "Is Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega losing his grip? The Panamanian strongman, unable to intimidate his restive, democracy-seeking countrymen, has put on a new display of muscle. . . . The revelations of Colonel Díaz, however, seem to have uncorked a heretofore untapped well of democratic sentiment. . . . A military leader with a strong sense of duty would be considering retirement. General Noriega however, appears to lack a strong sense of duty. Meanwhile, the Panamanian people are showing a readiness to keep the pressure on."

Notwithstanding the *Post's* wishful thinking, the leaders of the business lockout which had shut most of the country's stores, banks, and industries for 48 hours, ended their "civic strike" and told the *Washington Times* that they were going into hiding. National Civic Crusade President Roberto Brines boasted they had forced Noriega into a repressive mode. Panama "is no longer a quasi-democracy, but a full-fledged military dictatorship," he fed back to eager ears in Washington.

Yet the Defense Forces which the U.S. government wants to send "back to the barracks" are, according to General Noriega, "an active participant in the people's labors; they are not apart from the economic, social, and political conditions of the people where they operate. We have made them developmentalist, popular, and creative, in the sense that our men do not stay in the barracks playing war games. Rather they go to the fields to work with the peasants, to work with the workers; they have a social concept of bearing arms."

This may be why all efforts to split the military from the Panamanian people have been unsuccessful so far; it is also why, if successful, they would dash any hope of preventing the "Vietnamization" of Central America.