

Panama

Documents show State Dept. backs cocaine traffickers against Noriega

by Valerie Rush

Documents seized by Panamanian law enforcement officers in early August contain air-tight proof that the U.S. State Department is working with the so-called Medellín Cartel, the world's largest drug-trafficking organization, responsible for 90% or more of the cocaine inundating American cities.

This is the same U.S. State Department which has been working to oust the commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, on charges which include alleged links to drug trafficking—and it is now clear, that they are doing this in cahoots with the Medellín Cartel.

Further, *EIR* has just obtained a copy, under the Freedom of Information Act, of a March 4, 1985 telex from the office of the U.S. ambassador to Panama to the U.S. State Department, which shows that the State Department *knew* the Medellín Cartel was bent on revenge against the Panamanian Defense Forces for their role in shutting down the First Interamericas Bank that year.

Since the State Department has so brazenly made the Medellín Cartel's bankers the basis of their Panama policy, it is no surprise that Colombia is retreating under the mob assault. On July 23, Colombia's justice minister made the devastating announcement that all outstanding arrest warrants against the Cartel's leaders were revoked, from cocaine king Pablo Escobar on down.

Drug plot uncovered

A government-ordered raid Aug. 4 on the offices of the Panama Chamber of Commerce, headquarters of the opposition's so-called "Civic Crusade," turned up extensive evidence, not only that its leaders were plotting the overthrow of the constitutionally elected Panamanian government, but that the State Department, through its embassy in Panama City, had offered the post of defense minister in a U.S.-imposed regime to former PDF chief Gen. (ret.) Rubén Paredes, one of the top Medellín Cartel links to Panama.

Further, the U.S. Justice Department is currently sponsoring a farcical Miami grand jury investigation into opposition charges that General Noriega is involved in drug trafficking. The star witness against Noriega is the former book-keeper of the Medellín Cartel—busted in 1983 thanks to the joint efforts of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and then-Colonel Noriega.

To top it off, the *cause célèbre* of the Panamanian opposition forces—the unhinged former number-two man in the Panama Defense Forces, Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera—is being defended in the courts by one Alvin Weeden, a Panamanian lawyer exposed by *EIR* in 1986 as a courier who laundered more than half a million dollars for the drug syndicate.

The 'democratic' opposition

The government raid on the Chamber of Commerce, deplored as a violation of civil rights during a press conference by U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, occurred after it was learned that opposition forces based there were circulating leaflets advising acts of violence during a planned demonstration on Aug. 7. Boxes of materials confiscated reportedly included leaflets describing how to construct molotov cocktails, how to shoot down police helicopters from apartment rooftops, etc. Copies of telegrams sent to top officials in the U.S., France, Israel, and Japan, requesting a suspension of aid to the present Delvalle government, were seized. A timetable for a coup d'état was also discovered, including the following elements:

- ouster of Noriega and close military associates;
- ouster of President Delvalle, Vice President Esquivel, and their replacement with a governing junta;
- eliminating the supreme court and electoral tribunal, to be replaced with elected magistrates;
- eliminating the national assembly, and replacing it with a constituent assembly to write a new constitution;
- holding presidential elections one year after coup.

Perhaps the most incriminating discovery was a memorandum on a meeting between a Chamber of Commerce staffer and former PDF commander Rubén Darío Paredes. The staffer, according to the memo, reportedly spoke for U.S. embassy political attaché John Maisto in offering the retired general the post of defense minister in the new government being plotted. Maisto, formerly the State Department desk officer on the Philippines and a key coordinator of Marcos's overthrow there before his deployment to Panama, has been denounced virtually daily in the Panamanian government press as the point man for U.S. destabilization efforts in the country. He also reportedly channeled \$20 million to the Panamanian private sector, as reimbursement for the costs of

the lock-outs of the Civic Crusade.

The Panamanian daily paper *Crítica* reported that U.S. Ambassador Davis showed up at the Chamber of Commerce during the raid. News reports the next morning were claiming that Panama's foreign minister has been provided sufficient evidence from the raid to force Davis's expulsion from the country.

Six key opposition figures, among them Chamber of Commerce president and Maisto collaborator Aurelio Barria, have gone into hiding after learning of arrest warrants against them following the raid. The octogenarian former President and Nazi Arnulfo Arias—boosted by the State Department as a possible replacement for President Delvalle—went to the U.S. just before the raid, and is now reportedly in the Miami area.

The Medellín connection

Just who is the man the State Department would impose in Panama in place of General Noriega? General Paredes's ties to the cocaine-running Ochoa family in Colombia, who are co-partners of the Medellín Cartel, surfaced in March 1986, when his son was first kidnaped and then murdered by the Cartel as "payment" for bungling a cocaine shipment for which Paredes, Jr. was responsible. Three hundred four kilos of nearly pure cocaine were seized by Colombian authorities aboard the luxury yacht *Krill*, whose owner was listed as Crystal Sky Investments, which listed Paredes as its attorney.

When Paredes, Jr. first disappeared, Paredes contacted the Ochoas, who reportedly assured the general that they did not have his son. When Paredes, Jr. was dug up in a Medellín grave with his two missing Panamanian associates, shot Mafia-style with a single bullet through the head, the grieving general excused his son as "an adventurer . . . [who] paid dearly for his lack of experience."

Paredes, Jr. was not the only Paredes working with the cocaine cartel. In 1986, the Panamanian government published a report, *Sixteen Years of Fighting Drug Traffic*, which reported that the Ochoa mob had given a "former National Guard commander" specially bred pacing horses, in return for a promise to turn Panama into a cocaine-processing center. Shortly thereafter, *El Tiempo* of Bogota named General Paredes as the recipient.

General Paredes also provided protection for the operations in Panama of the Cartel's terrorist army, the Colombian M-19, according to reports from law-enforcement officials of several countries. The reports specify that Paredes was known to have invited M-19ers to his home, and under his protection the narco-terrorists used Panama for money-laundering, weapons procurement, and as a safe haven from Colombian military campaigns.

The Miami grand jury investigating drug-trafficking charges against Noriega has based itself on the testimony of one Ramón Millian Rodríguez, the Medellín Cartel's former accountant who is currently serving a 35-year sentence for drug trafficking. He was arrested on May 5, 1983, when he

tried to leave Fort Lauderdale, Florida with \$54 million in cash.

On July 20 of this year, the Panamanian Department of National Investigations (DENI) released to the public a photocopy of a letter signed by one James L. Bramble, special agent of the U.S. Justice Department, which expressed gratitude to then-Col. Manuel Antonio Noriega for his cooperation, "without which the investigation and arrest of Millian Rodríguez would have been impossible." Noriega was head of the PDF's anti-narcotics office for 12 years.

Another angle on the drug mob's control over the anti-Noriega campaign is the role of Alvin Weeden, who signed on as attorney for Col. Díaz Herrera, the nut case whose now-retracted accusations against Noriega served to trigger the opposition's present drive to overthrow the Panama government.

Alvin and his brother George are partners in Banco Weeden Internacional, located in San José, Costa Rica. According to investigators in Costa Rica, the Weeden bank and several other "shell companies" owned by the brothers in Costa Rica and Miami, serve to launder drug-money. According to reliable reports, the two laundered \$10 million in 1985, \$2 million of that in the month of June alone! In September 1985, 11 checks worth more than \$4 million were laundered through the Weeden corporation Cocrefisa, personally transported to Miami by one of the Weeden brothers.

Mob's revenge

EIR has received a State Department document showing that the U.S. government has known for two years at least, that Manuel Antonio Noriega was the target of a vendetta by the savage Colombian drug mafia.

In March 1985 the U.S. Embassy in Panama sent a telex to the Secretary of State, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the embassies of Madrid and Bogota, advising them that the Defense Forces were targeted for "retaliation" after they shut down First Interamericas Bank for laundering drug proceeds. First Interamericas was the joint property of cocaine czar Jorge Ochoa, and Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, described in U.S. judicial archives as head of one of the world's most powerful drug-trafficking networks.

The telex states: "The seizure of a bank in Panama for laundering drug proceeds was the first ever by the GOP and was the result of a cooperative investigation between the DEA/PCO, NYDETF (FP5), the U.S. Attorneys Office of the Eastern District of N.Y., and the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). . . . To date, the PDF has received numerous telephone calls of retaliation. On March 2, 1985, the PDF developed information that Jesus Balderama-Vasquez, Jorge Alonso, and Maiquel Nulfo would arrive in Panama from Colombia on March 4, 1985. The PDF informed DEA/PCO that the suspects' motive for traveling to Panama may be in retaliation for the seizure. The PDF and DEA/PCO will monitor the activity of the suspects while they are in Panama."