

Senate says Panama's military 'No. 1 threat'

by Gretchen Small

The U.S. Senate considers Panama's military—not Soviet narco-terrorism—the number-one security threat to the Panama Canal, will not allow U.S. obligations under the 1979 Panama Canal Treaties to be fulfilled, until Panama submits to rule by Project Democracy's secret government, and seeks to have any U.S. official who dares disagree with the policy be censured, or fired.

Such are the principal conclusions contained in the 116-page *Report on Panama* released on Dec. 8 by a six-member Senate Staff Delegation which had visited Panama between Nov. 12-16, "to gather information on . . . what progress, if any, has been made in restoring democracy and the rule of law to Panama." In pompous tones, the delegation insists that it is "democracy" which requires Panama accept foreign rule.

The U.S. Senate will not consider the 1979 Panama Canal Treaties binding, until broad-sweeping military, political, and judicial changes are implemented, the Senate *Report* threatens. The report will prove explosive in Panama. Panama's government has charged that behind the U.S. campaign to replace the Commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, and put a weakened PDF into receivership, is a plan not to fulfill U.S. commitments made in the 1979 Treaties. U.S. officials, fearing a Panamanian nationalist outbreak, have sworn up and down that no such plans exist.

The Senate report, too, repeats that the Canal must not be made an issue, but portrays a return to democracy—as they define it—in Panama as an integral part of the Panama Canal Treaties. "During the Treaty negotiation and ratification processes, Torrijos made commitments to United States leaders on the issue of democracy in Panama. . . . Senator Byrd came down to Panama and said very plainly: 'You want a Treaty. You need a two-thirds vote in the Senate. To get that, you must make a commitment to democracy.' Reportedly, Torrijos made that commitment to a number of Senators," it warns.

To meet that commitment, "the leadership of the PDF must be changed," and Noriega resign, or be removed from office, the report stipulates. In addition, the U.S. Senate expects *Panama's* military to implement changes in promotion policy, limits on years of military service, and fix a set term for service as Commander of the PDF, as conditions for

"genuine democracy."

"The Panamanian military . . . is the single most destabilizing force inside Panama today and thus, indirectly, the greatest threat to the security of the Canal," the Senate report declares. Therefore, "the delegation recommends that . . . no American official—civilian or military—should do or say anything that could be interpreted as providing political approval or moral support to the Noriega regime."

Such a gag rule would forbid U.S. anti-drug officials to cooperate with Panama's government and military in fighting narcotics. There could never again be a letter like that from the head of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, John Lawn, in May 1987 to Noriega, stating that DEA and PDF had "once again . . . joined efforts to strike an effective blow against the drug-traffickers . . . many millions of dollars and many thousands of pounds of drugs have been taken from the drug-traffickers and international money launderers."

And now, the Socialist International

The Report's release quickly fed the war machinery being mounted against Noriega. "A consensus had emerged at the Pentagon, CIA, and State that, in the words of one senior official, 'this guy should go tomorrow,' " the *New York Times* claimed on Dec. 14. The *Times* report concluded a U.S. press blitz asserting that Noriega had cut a deal with Moscow, Libya's Qaddafi, and El Salvador's guerrillas—a story based largely on the word of a Nicaraguan defector and a convicted Panamanian drug-runner. The reports are "psychological warfare" against Panama, Noriega charged on Dec. 16, "including the story . . . that Qaddafi is coming to Panama. . . . That is a lie," said.

Ironically, as the cries went up on Noriega's alleged "leftist" turn, the Socialist International was busy seeking the release of the hero of the opposition movement, retired Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera—a man the Senate's report admits has long been viewed by U.S. diplomatic staff "as sinister and unprincipled, as a frustrated opportunist, 'probably a leftist.'" Forced out of the PDF in June 1987, Díaz Herrera responded by accusing Noriega of various crimes ranging from electoral fraud, to assassinations and drug-running. It is his charges which the Senate delegation, despite its knowledge of Díaz Herrera's moral character, assert as justification for U.S. support for overthrowing the government of Panama!

Díaz Herrera later recanted, admitting that he had no proof of any of his allegations. In December, he was found guilty of crimes against national domestic security, and sentenced to five years in jail. But on Dec. 25, Díaz Herrera was allowed to leave Panama for Venezuela—on a private plane belonging to Venezuelan socialist Carlos Andres Pérez. Arranging his release had been discussed at the early December meeting of the Latin American branch of the Socialist International, according to press accounts in the region.