

Panama mobilizes against invasion threat

by Peter Rush

Panama's Legislative Assembly, employing its constitutional powers, removed from office President Eric Arturo Delvalle, for violating the Constitution by following instructions from a foreign power, when he gave the order to fire Armed Forces Commander Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega Feb. 25. He did so without obtaining the constitutionally required signature of the justice and government ministers on the dismissal order. Political parties, trade unions, and other organizations immediately mobilized behind General Noriega.

U.S. officials seemed bent on proving Noriega's charges that the entire operation against him was an excuse for military intervention into Panama, and for ripping up the Panama Canal treaties.

Delvalle admitted in a telephone interview with the *Washington Post* later that evening, that in his view Noriega was not "guilty of anything." He also made no secret of the fact that he was acting in the closest collaboration with U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis, who spent the entire evening of Feb. 25 at Delvalle's house. Delvalle told the *Post* that Davis "supports, totally and absolutely, my decision."

There was not only no significant public manifestation of support for Delvalle in the streets, but crowds instead poured out to support General Noriega and call for Delvalle's ouster. Moreover, the entire command of the armed forces backed Noriega. Col. Leonidas Macias, military chief of police, spoke for the officer corps when he said, "None of us wants to be commander. Our commander is staying. The President is going. We all support Noriega." Delvalle had named Col. Marcos Justines, to replace Noriega, but he said on the armed forces television network, "When I heard of this offer, I rejected it immediately." He said that Delvalle "had acted under pressure from the United States. I think it was an error. They should let the Panamanians make our own decisions."

The Legislative Assembly appointed Education Minister Manuel Solis Palma minister-in-charge of the presidency. He immediately drew praise for announcing that Panama would reassume a more active role in the Non-Aligned Movement, and that the government would reestablish dialogue with the trade unions and other sectors in making economic policy.

On Friday, Feb. 26, Delvalle made clear that he was intending to pretend he was still President, a maneuver mean-

ingful only if he intends to wage a battle against Panama on behalf of his U.S. backers. He spent almost the entire day talking to the foreign press. He "appointed" Lawrence Chewney Fabrega to "represent Panama" before the Organization of American States, and instructed Fabrega to talk to every delegation in an effort to have the OAS "recognize" his presidency. Within Panama, despite the continued absence of any public manifestation on his behalf, the opposition Civil Crusade of professionals and business organizations called for an indefinite general strike to begin on Monday, Feb. 29.

Delvalle has now fully joined with the opposition. He evidently trusts that economic misery will permit him to regain power. Interviewed on U.S. television, he said he would support a U.S. trade embargo, and that Panamanians must suffer until Noriega is deposed.

Threats from Washington

Economic warfare is indeed the central weapon in the U.S. arsenal. A Feb. 22 article in the *New York Times* detailed the vulnerability of the Panamanian economy, noting that the government will have trouble meeting its next payroll, and will also be unable to make the next round of payments on its foreign debt.

In a televised interview aired Feb. 27-28, Sen. John Kerry stated, "What you have to do is begin to precipitate a larger crisis, frankly. Because without the larger crisis, the kind of real economic pressure and other things that have to happen will not be brought to bear." He added, "I personally don't think it will come to civil war, though it could." On CBS's "This Morning" program on Feb. 26, Sen. Alfonse D'Amato lied that U.S. citizens are already being harassed, as he attempted to build his case for U.S. military intervention. He said, "It is not without precedent that the U.S. move" its troops. He cited the invasion of Grenada, and President Eisenhower's landing of troops in Lebanon in 1958, as appropriate precedents for what should happen in Panama.

Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci put fuel on the fire by saying that "nothing can be ruled out." George Bush, in a campaign speech, said that the United States should do "whatever is necessary, including military force" to protect U.S. interests.

Meanwhile, in the OAS, the efforts of Delvalle and the United States were temporarily stymied when the ambassador of Paraguay, chairing the OAS this month, refused to convoke an extraordinary session to consider a resolution introduced by El Salvador "recognizing" Delvalle as the constitutional head of state of Panama. The resolution has so far received only the support of Venezuela and Argentina, of the major countries of Ibero-America. It was backed by most of the Central American and Caribbean states. The Mexican foreign ministry has announced that the Group of Eight Contadora nations had suspended Panama until it is clarified whether it is still a democratic country, but also reaffirmed its opposition to intervention in other countries, as a warning to the United States.