

Panama: U.S. seeks Ibero-American figleaf

by Robyn Quijano

Days after Secretary of State George Shultz announced that all negotiations with Panama were off, and George Bush declared he would consider military intervention or "clandestine activity" to oust Panama Defense Forces Commander Manuel Antonio Noriega, a new operation was put into place to "Latinize" operations against that Central American nation. For months, there has been an effort to organize a "Latin American figleaf" to cover a U.S. military invasion "to impose democracy" on Panama. Now, after the latest diplomatic debacle, the administration is attempting to rerun the Philippines-style destabilization started three months ago, this time with a cast of Ibero-American characters.

But Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma and Noriega have received so much support from both the military forces of the region, and the continent's trade union movements, that any mediation by Ibero-Americans must take into account the general Ibero-American perception that this is flagrant U.S. aggression. Any Ibero-American leader that overtly takes the U.S. side against the Panamanian government would risk being tossed out of his own country as a traitor. The U.S. economic warfare, including the seizure of bank accounts, airplanes, and other assets, which has caused unemployment, hunger, and economic chaos, is seen as a precedent for aggression against any nation that halts debt payments.

Carlos Andrés Pérez, ex-President of Venezuela, has been offering his good offices to mediate for the administration. On May 31, Pérez and Daniel Oduber, ex-President of Costa Rica, both exposed by *EIR* for their links to fugitive drug financier Robert Vesco, met with President Solís Palma and Noriega. State's Elliott Abrams told Reuter's May 29, that he prefers mediation by Central American countries "more susceptible to U.S. influence." After meeting with Pérez, Abrams hailed Guatemala and Venezuela for their cooperation.

Pérez delivered a veiled threat from Abrams to Solís Palma. I am "terrified" by the the new official position of the U.S. not to negotiate, directly or indirectly, he said. "They are practically telling us that measures of force are coming, that military intervention has not been rejected as an option."

While Pérez "Latinized" the negotiations for Abrams, he differed on one key issue with the U.S. "offer." He accepted the legitimacy of the Solís Palma government, since it has

massive popular support despite the harsh economic crisis, and is recognized by every Ibero-American government.

While Pérez is playing it carefully, Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo sent his personal representative to "mediate" the crisis, accompanied by Allen Weinstein of the U.S. Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Weinstein told the Defense Forces' Strategic Council that Cerezo's offer to mediate was backed by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Arias had requested on June 1, that Pérez, the Latin American secretary of the Socialist International, mediate along with Cerezo, who is the highest level Christian Democrat in power in the region. The weight of the two international parties is to create the muscle to force Noriega into exile.

Weinstein was head of the AID-funded "Democracy Project" of the American Political Foundation set up in 1982 to draw up plans for what became the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). In 1985, Weinstein personally headed up the "independent observer" team, sent by the NED to monitor the Philippines elections, which led to the U.S. imposition of Corazon Aquino.

Unfortunately for Weinstein, the NED is very well known in Panama for its role in the Philippines destabilization. U.S. embassy official John Maisto, whom Noriega has charged with running the destabilization of Panama, has been reported in the Panamanian press as having run the destabilization of the Philippines. His links with the NED's Project Democracy have been documented in Panama's press.

The Panamanian daily *La Critica* on June 1 published the text of an alleged National Security Council briefing paper marked "secret/sensitive," prepared for an April 8, 1986 NSC meeting on Panama which President Reagan attended. *La Critica* published a facsimile of the document which states that the main issue is "to guarantee U.S. control over the interoceanic waterway," after the year 2000. Under the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, the U.S. is scheduled to relinquish control over the canal on Dec. 31, 1999. The U.S. needs "a policy directed to assuring our control over the canal, beyond 2000. Reports of corruption in high levels of the PDF offer an opportunity to unleash a campaign to destabilize Panama, and legally abrogate the treaties." Whether or not the document is authentic, it describes what most Ibero-Americans believe is the truth.

The indictment against Noriega is also widely believed to be a political ploy. Should you believe the DEA, who has praised Noriega for years of collaboration, or two convicted drug runners whose testimony is the basis for the indictment? On June 1, a ring of U.S. Army and former Army personnel, based in the Canal Zone, were arrested for shipping cocaine through the military mail system. Noriega, who helped the U.S. arrest gangster Meyer Lansky, also helped nail this gang. DEA officials announced that one of the suspects was arrested by the PDF at the DEA's request. "The Panamanian Defense Forces have never ceased to cooperate with this agency," DEA spokesman Bob Feldcamp said.