

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### Carter gang out to scuttle elections

*The man who stole the 1976 U.S. election from Gerald Ford has sent a team to "manage" the Panama elections.*

**O**n March 13, a three-man delegation from Jimmy Carter's Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government arrived in Panama to carve out a role for itself in the country's May 7 presidential elections. The delegation included former United States Ambassador to Panama Ambler Moss, and representatives of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias's Liberation Party and Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez's Democratic Action party.

The same outfit played a key role in elections in the Philippines, Haiti, and Chile, said Larry Garber, an "election consultant" with the group.

The arrival of the Carter gang is part of the efforts by the U.S. "secret government" apparatus known as Project Democracy, to get a replay of the operation through which Ferdinand Marcos was ousted in the Philippines, or to scuttle the elections altogether.

The previous week, Panama had expelled the Chilean Project Democracy agent Genaro Arriagada, who led the "no" campaign which defeated Gen. Augusto Pinochet in a referendum on Oct 5, 1988. Arriagada went to Panama to help coordinate the American-controlled opposition's campaign. Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) came to Arriagada's defense, claiming that "he is widely respected in many nations for his expertise in free elections."

This campaign against Panama contrasts sharply with the Bush administration's efforts to help the Marxist guerrillas in El Salvador get

some kind of power-sharing arrangement, and to upgrade its relations with Nicaragua.

The U.S. embassy-controlled opposition in Panama is charging that free elections are not possible, that their press is shut down, that they are being denied media access, that the government will commit fraud, and so forth. They are demanding international supervision of the elections.

The charges do not bear scrutiny. Under law, every political party in the country is entitled to 30 minutes a week on the state-owned National Radio network to make their pitch to the voters. In addition, the opposition controls most of Panama's commercial television networks, several radio stations, and are given coverage in the country's most respected newspaper, *La Estrella*—despite the fact that it is owned by the family of the government's presidential candidate, Carlos Duque.

The main problem faced by the opposition is that its largest party, the Authentic Panamenistas, has refused to join the coalition put together by the U.S. embassy. The party's presidential candidate, Hildebrando Nicosia, charged that the U.S. embassy-controlled Opposition Democratic Alliance had offered him \$1.4 million to join their coalition.

Nor are most Panamanians keen on the brand of democracy being sold by Jimmy Carter's group, particularly since one of the key players is Venezuela's Carlos Andrés Pérez, who has suspended constitutional rights and sent out tanks to suppress any rebel-

lion against the genocidal austerity ordered by the foreign creditors.

The greatest danger lies in the efforts to bring about a military confrontation between the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and the U.S. Armed Forces. Such a confrontation came dangerously close on March 3, in the "the license plates incident." First reports in the United States media had it that the PDF "had kidnaped" over 100 American schoolchildren in Panama, to force the United States to pay taxes withheld under the sanctions imposed by the Reagan administration in an effort to force the ouster of the commander of the PDF, Gen. Manuel Noriega.

The facts were otherwise, as shown by Panama's television, which filmed the entire incident. Panamanian traffic cops stopped the buses and issued tickets for failure to have proper license plates. The buses, owned by a private American company, had been issued U.S. Navy plates, to bypass Panama's requirements that licenses be renewed once a year. This requires a certificate of tax payment, which the company could not produce, since it is forbidden to pay taxes to Panama by the Reagan sanctions.

While the tickets were being issued, U.S. provost Maj. Allan Mansfield showed up and engaged in a heated discussion with the senior Panamanian officer on the scene, Francisco Córdoba. U.S. authorities in Panama decided to back down, suspending busing, and asked parents to drive their children to school.

But the decision by the U.S. military to avoid unnecessary confrontation with the PDF, caused Heritage Foundation staffer, former Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, to accuse Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm. William Crowe with burying the incidents "to achieve a business-as-usual relationship with Noriega."