

OAS puts off Panama meeting to save U.S. from embarrassment

by Carlos Wesley

The Organization of American States (OAS) voted at a special foreign ministers' meeting on June 6 to extend by six weeks, until July 19, the mandate of a special commission that is supposed to negotiate the removal of the commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega, the dissolution of the Panamanian government, and the transfer of power to the United States-backed opposition. The OAS commission, made up of Ecuador's Foreign Minister Diego Cordovez, Mario Palencia of Guatemala, Sahadeo Basedo of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Secretary General of the OAS, the Brazilian João Baena Soares, was originally appointed May 17 with instructions to come up with recommendations for final action at the June 6 meeting. Instead, after several junkets to Panama, the commission reported that "progress is being made," and requested more time.

The Ibero-American governments, facing growing internal pressures from their citizens for having gone along with the Bush administration's demand to vote against Panama during the OAS meeting in early May, clearly wanted to stall action that would signal support for further U.S. moves, including a military intervention into Panama. In fact, the Ibero-Americans did not even want to hold the meeting at all. But, according to Ibero-American diplomatic sources in Washington, the Bush administration began twisting arms for the meeting to proceed as scheduled. The administration also demanded, according to the sources, that the OAS adopt sanctions against Panama at the meeting. State Department employee Juan B. Sosa, who poses as "Panama's ambassador to the United States," said in an interview June 2, that the options being considered by the administration for the OAS meeting included trade embargoes, breaking diplomatic relations, and measures such as "those utilized in 1965 in the Dominican Republic," when the United States simply invaded and got the OAS to authorize the invasion after the fact.

In an interview in the *Washington Post* June 2, President Bush himself laid down the line: "I will be encouraging the OAS to continue, hopefully more vigorously, its role. That is the proper step at this point," he said. Bush went on to say that there was widespread agreement "in terms of the fact that it is seen clearly that Noriega stole this election and brutally beat up the opposition. A picture is worth a million words when you saw [Panamanian banker and opposition vice-presidential candidate] Guillermo Ford beat up and bleeding."

But just three days later, the administration was willing, in fact eager, to agree to the Ibero-Americans' request for a postponement. What happened to bring about that change of heart? "The dramatic events in China," reported Mexico's *El Financiero* on June 7, had forced the United States to seek the OAS compromise formula "to maintain appearances."

The Bush administration's response to the Communist government's massacre of thousands of students in Beijing and elsewhere in the China made it impossible for the OAS to proceed with the U.S. gameplan against Panama at this point. Bush merely "deplored" the violence in China, and refused to impose trade or diplomatic sanctions, on the grounds that they would "hurt the Chinese people." He echoed the Soviet and Cuban line of "not interfering in China's internal affairs," and his only concrete action was to order a useless ban on arm sales, which the Chinese weren't buying anyway.

In contrast, against Panama—where the restraint shown by the Noriega-led PDF limited the death toll to 5 (two of them members of the PDF) in over two years of unrest fomented by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—the United States has waged an economic war that has caused mass unemployment among the poor, wage cuts, and reduction in health and sanitation services, which threaten epidemics of malaria and dengue fever.

And while Bush waxed eloquent about Guillermo Ford being "beat up and bleeding" during a melée caused when his bodyguards, on loan from the United States embassy in Panama, shot at Panamanian security forces, he limited himself to mouthing bland platitudes about the thousands of dead Chinese. But then again, banker Ford is white, and the Chinese students are not.

Resistance to 'regional solution'

Meanwhile, "the decision of Latin American countries to cooperate with Washington's efforts to seek a 'regional solution' to the crisis in Panama through the Organization of American States has generated widespread criticism and skepticism in the hemisphere," reported *The New York Times* on June 4.

This was dramatically demonstrated on June 5 in Mexico, when 30 congressmen took over the office of the secretary of foreign relations and held a peaceful sit-in until the day after the OAS meeting, to demand that Mexico "rectify its attitude before the OAS and support Panama in the meeting just

getting under way.” The lawmakers, all members of the PPS party, said in a letter that “the position that Mexico adopts at the [OAS] meeting is of extreme importance in order to prevent the U.S. Government from concretizing its interventionist plans and objectives.”

Even more remarkable, the Mexican lawmakers defended General Noriega by name as “the legitimate heir and most firm defender of Torrijismo,” a reference to the political doctrine established by Panama’s late leader Gen. Omar Torrijos. In a published statement, they noted, “the escalation of aggressive actions is under way: first, the slander campaign against General Noriega; second, the economic blockade; third, the attempt to divide the PDF; fourth, the open support for the candidate of the anti-patriotic forces Guillermo Endara and the discrediting of the electoral process; fifth, the attempt to use the OAS as an instrument of its policy against Panama; and sixth, the announcement by sectors of the U.S. Congress that they don’t want to appoint a Panamanian administrator in 1990 as specified in the Treaties.”

In Argentina, veterans of the War of the Malvinas staged protest demonstrations. Demonstrations were also held in the Dominican Republic, and advertisements condemning the attacks on Panama appeared in the local press. In Uruguay, the foreign minister was hauled before Congress to explain the vote against Panama.

While the crisis has been postponed, it is by no means over. The Panamanian government has given no indication that it is willing to surrender. In fact, right after the OAS meeting June 6, Panama’s Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter said that no improvement in relations is possible until the U.S. lifts the economic embargo against Panama and stops threatening the use of force. Panamanian delegations fanned out across the continent, to rally defense for Panama’s sovereignty. General Noriega himself placed advertisements in several Central and South American newspapers, warning that if the United States succeeds in its war against Panama, who will come to the defense of their own nations when their sovereignty were attacked?

In an interview with Mexico’s *La Jornada* published May 25, Noriega reminded people that Panama’s mobilization to head off U.S. military action against Panama, is also in the best interests of the United States itself. “I would say that the U.S. has much to lose and will gain little” from a military intervention in Panama, said Noriega. “We know, and they know, that if there is an invasion of Panama’s civilian areas, it could have incalculable consequences,” turning all of Ibero-America against the United States.

If people “want to fool themselves with the disinformation that the aim of this war is Noriega, that’s their problem,” he said. But what is at stake, is Panama’s geographical position “in the center of North and South America. A nation as small as ours can be torn up,” he said, “but he who plays with fire inevitably gets burned. We hope that reason prevails, that solutions are found, but we know that the future of Latin America is being decided right now in Panama.”

Investigative Leads

Buendía case: a Mexican Irangate?

by Isaias Amezcua

Last May 30 was the fifth anniversary of the murder of leftist Mexican journalist Manuel Buendía, by a professional hit carried out in the middle of Mexico City. Behind the assassination hides a powerful political apparatus linked to the drug trade and to intelligence activities, which has the nation in its grip. There lies the real source of corruption in Mexico, but it is a corruption that will not come under attack from President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

Manuel Buendía enjoyed enormous influence in all strata of the country. He specialized in matters relating to the drug trade and to international espionage. On several occasions he was instrumental, in collaboration with various Mexican intelligence officials, in dismantling dirty CIA operations on Mexican soil. His denunciation of Lawrence Starnfield, the former CIA clandestine operations chief in Europe who, in 1978, became The Company’s station chief in Mexico, was notorious. It was Buendía who forced the U.S. Embassy to withdraw Starnfield, once Buendía’s revelations made Starnfield *persona non grata* in Mexico. Buendía was also a declared enemy of George Bush, when Bush was CIA chief.

When Buendía was shot in the back on May 30, 1984, political circles in the country were shaken, since it had been widely assumed that Buendía had government protection. That protective umbrella, however, had ceased to exist the moment then-President Miguel de la Madrid removed Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios from his position as chief of the government’s security service.

Within days of the assassination, President De la Madrid ordered an exhaustive investigation of the crime, which was never carried out. Just the opposite occurred. The various police agencies that intervened in the supposed investigation succeeded in destroying whatever evidence might have led them to the authors of the crime. One of the principal figures responsible for this was Antonio Zorrilla Pérez, who was director of the Federal Security Service (DFS), a body that included the political and anti-terrorist police forces.

Private investigations, some of them carried out by a group of Buendía’s friends, have established that Zorrilla