

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

OAS rules out foreign interference

The rest of Ibero-America has refused to help the Bush administration destroy Panama's national sovereignty.

The foreign ministers of Ibero-America voted on July 20 to let the people of Panama settle their internal affairs without foreign interference. In a meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS), the ministers voted to support a tripartite dialogue between the government (including Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega's Panama Defense Forces), the pro-government political parties, and the CIA-financed Opposition Democratic Civic Alliance (ADO-C).

The OAS vote was a complete reversal from its previous meeting on May 17, when the same ministers bowed to U.S. demands and called for the dissolution of the Panamanian government and the ouster of Noriega.

It was also a stunning setback for the Bush administration's plans to have the OAS establish the precedent for "multilateral" intervention, in support of the United States' intentions of retaining a presence in Panama past the year 2000, in violation of the 1977 Canal Treaties.

The ministers refused to make the departure of General Noriega a precondition for a settlement. "That has nothing to do with us," said one of the foreign ministers. "That's something for the Panamanians to resolve among themselves."

They also refused to declare the U.S.-financed ADO-C the winner of Panama's May 7 national elections, and instead called for new elections "as soon as possible." Those elections were annulled by the government of Panama because of gross interference

by the United States, including vote buying, influence peddling, and ballot stealing.

Also, for the first time, the OAS criticized U.S. violations of Panama's sovereignty, albeit indirectly, by noting in its July 20 declaration that the parties to the dialogue in Panama will discuss the "cessation of military aggression and threats by the United States against Panama," and "strict compliance with the spirit of the letter of the Torrijos-Carter [Panama Canal] treaties by the United States, and non-interference by the United States in the political affairs of Panama."

The response of the Bush administration has been to step up preparations for war in Panama. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney announced on July 20 the early retirement of Gen. Fred Woerner, head of the Panama-based U.S. Southern Command. The administration was reportedly dissatisfied with Woerner's cautious behavior in Panama, the *Washington Times* reported on July 21. Woerner, who was described as "Noriega's patsy" and "a wimp" in leaks put out by the administration, is being replaced by Gen. Maxwell Reid Thurman, the current chief of the Army Training and Doctrine Command at Fort Monroe, Virginia.

Woerner's ouster comes amid an escalation of the war of nerves against Panama initiated by the head of the Army component of the Southern Command, Gen. Marc Cisneros. Since July 1, Cisneros has launched a series of provocations, including the armed occupation of several Panamanian

towns, the takeover of a water purification plant, and public calls for a military invasion.

But such tactics have only helped turn the OAS against the United States. In one of his sabre-rattling exercises, General Cisneros had his troops surround a PDF office on the day when representatives from the OAS were to meet there with Noriega. The move "was really stupid," said an OAS staffer, although administration officials are now blaming the ousted General Woerner for it.

Support for the U.S. among the Ibero-Americans began to erode quickly following the "Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama." At that meeting, held in David, Panama on June 17-18, some 150 Ibero-American lawmakers, representing 1,000 of their colleagues, determined that the crisis—including the false charges that "Noriega is a drug trafficker"—were part of a campaign by the United States to retain control of Panamanian territory beyond the date set by the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties.

The administration lost even more ground because it failed to keep the promises made to the Ibero-American nations in exchange for agreeing to U.S. demands on Panama at the May 17 OAS meeting. In fact, in the days that followed that vote, the U.S. declared that Brazil was "an unfair trading partner," and threatened it with trade sanctions; Ecuador saw its funds unilaterally impounded by Citibank, and Mexico did not get a much-ballyhooed agreement for debt relief from the banks that was promised it.

The U.S. administration did not even bother to clear up its \$24 million of arrears with the near-bankrupt OAS organization, forcing the OAS to pass the hat among its members in order to send its representatives to Panama.