

## U.S. plot fails against Noriega in Panama

by Carlos Wesley

A plot by the United States to overthrow the government of Panama and to kidnap or possibly kill the commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega, was put down by forces loyal to Noriega on Oct. 3. Ten persons, all of them insurgents, were killed during the failed uprising staged by junior officers of the PDF. Among the dead were the nominal leader of the rebellion, Maj. Moises Giroldi Vera, who commanded the Urraca company, in charge of security at PDF headquarters. Other plotters managed to escape and were given refuge by the U.S. Southern Command at American military bases in Panama.

Noriega loyalists also detained several members of the PDF high command and placed them under investigation. They include Intelligence chief, Col. Guillermo Wong, chief of police Col. Julio Ow Young, and Col. Armando Palacios Gondola, of the combined U.S.-Panama board in charge of security for the Panama Canal.

Col. Wong's name had been mentioned in connection with a previous coup plot that was being arranged by a U.S. anti-Noriega ally, Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez. That plan was uncovered on May 11, when Panama's military attaché in Colombia revealed that he had been approached by a representative of Pérez and of former Colombian President Alfonso López Michelsen, an apologist for the Medellín cocaine cartel, with an offer of major financial assistance for Panama if the PDF would oust Noriega. Allegedly, Col. Wong was supposed to be Noriega's successor had the Pérez plan gone ahead.

### A war of nerves

The coup attempt got under way early in the morning of Oct. 3, when some 200 soldiers, largely from Mayor Giroldi's Urraca company, and anti-riot police headed by Captain

Edgardo Sandoval, who also died during the uprising, broke into the PDF Central Headquarters and managed to capture General Noriega. Immediately a gun battle broke out between loyalist forces at PDF headquarters and the insurgents.

For a short while, the plotters also took over one of the nation's television networks and a radio station, and read a communiqué proclaiming themselves the "Young Officers" movement and announcing that they had ousted Noriega and several members of the high command. They also said that they would hold new elections "as soon as possible, under the supervision of the Organization of American States."

Plans were for the plotters to turn Noriega over to U.S. personnel in Panama for removal to the United States, to be put on trial on fake drug-trafficking charges. But, giving new meaning to Gen. George Patton's famous comment, "They've got us surrounded, the poor bastards," Noriega claimed he personally overcame his captors. As he explained, "my rank imposed itself on them." He told his captors that they would have to kill him, since he would not surrender peacefully; that they were surrounded; and that if they didn't surrender, they would all be killed. Since they were not ready to die, and since their instructions from the United States were to take him alive, Noriega gained the psychological advantage.

While this war of nerves was going on between Noriega and his captors, the crack "Batallion 2000" and other pro-Noriega units were airlifted by helicopter into position around the PDF headquarters compound, decisively tipping the scales in favor of the loyalists. The airlift was necessary because U.S. troops in Panama had blocked all access roads to the compound.

At no point was the U.S.-supported opposition able to mobilize any forces into the streets in support of the coup,

proving once again that they enjoy no popular support. In fact, at the first sign of battle, Guillermo Endara, the corrupt former presidential candidate of the Central Intelligence Agency-financed ADO-C, the party of the pro-drug financial oligarchy, cut short a hunger strike and went into hiding with former vice presidential candidate Ricardo Arias Calderon. In sharp contrast, tens of thousands of people turned out to support Noriega at a rally in front of PDF headquarters on Oct. 4, the day after the failed coup.

There is no question that, had the United States committed its troops in Panama to the uprising, the coup would have succeeded, given the overwhelming superiority of U.S. military forces. According to some sources, one reason the United States did not give its wholehearted backing to the young officers, was because the administration was working on yet another plan for a coup involving senior officers of the PDF. In any case, an overt U.S. military intervention would have brought its forces into a direct confrontation with the "Batallion 2000," causing heavy losses to both sides, and would have forced the U.S. to militarily occupy Panama, triggering a backlash throughout Ibero-America.

Despite the Girolidi fiasco, the U.S. administration is still considering the use of force against Noriega. "The United States retains the option to use American forces; that option has never been ruled out," Secretary of State James Baker III told a congressional committee on Oct. 4.

### **Bush doth protest too much**

Panama's President Francisco Rodriguez said on Oct. 4 in New York City, where he was to address the United Nations, that his government has photographic evidence "that American troops with tanks and other weapons blocked the roads leading to the PDF headquarters before the insurgents launched their attack." He charged the United States with wanting to break the 1977 Canal Treaties "and perpetuate its military bases in Panama."

But even before the Panamanian President made the charge, George Bush was denying any U.S. involvement. "There are rumors around that this was some sort of an American operation, and I can tell you it is not true," said Bush on the afternoon of Oct. 3, right after it became apparent that the coup had collapsed. Underscoring the fact that the U.S. move against Noriega occurred in the context of its arrangements on global power-sharing with the Soviet Union, Bush chose a White House meeting with Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri Yazov to announce that the United States had played no part in the plot.

"Get out of here, do your job," Bush told the reporters present at his meeting with Yazov. "Beam your television signals to Panama, and tell the people there that the U.S. had nothing to do with any of this," said Bush, who has repeatedly called the PDF to stage a coup against Noriega.

But the President protested a bit too much. Department of Defense officials have admitted that American officers in

Panama, including the commander of U.S. Army South in Panama, Gen. Marc Cisneros, held several meetings with Major Girolidi, Girolidi's wife, and others involved in the plot. At these meetings, the U.S. reportedly agreed to deploy troops to block reinforcements from reaching Noriega. To support the rebellion, at least one U.S. Marine company from Howard Air Force Base in Panama, and one Army mechanized infantry unit from Fort Amador were deployed to block Panamanian highways, say Pentagon sources. Fort Amador, a facility shared by the U.S. and Panamanian military, was shut down, preventing another PDF unit loyal to Noriega from leaving the base.

Also, U.S. reconnaissance airplanes and helicopters were kept flying above the PDF central headquarters throughout the uprising, and conducted intelligence-gathering overflights all over Panama City while the attempt was in progress.

### **U.S.-Soviet condominium**

In addition to Bush's meeting with Yazov, there was other evidence that the U.S. plot against Noriega took place within the framework of U.S. condominium deals with the Soviets on Central America.

On Oct. 2, the night before the failed coup, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze confirmed in a speech to the New York Foreign Policy Association, that during their September meetings in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he and Secretary of State Baker had concluded an agreement on Central America. Two days later, Shevardnadze traveled to Nicaragua and explained that he and Bush had agreed on "the need to establish a mechanism of negotiations to define" the security needs of each Central American country.

"The Soviet Union and the United States could help the countries of the region define the concepts of [weapon] sufficiency," he said. "It is possible that the two superpowers could act as guarantors in the agreement on the equilibrium of forces." Shevardnadze added that conditions now exist for the U.S.S.R. to establish diplomatic relations with El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama, with which the Soviets now have no direct ties, reported the *Washington Post* Oct. 5.

As *EIR* has repeatedly reported from the beginning of the Panama crisis, the United States wants to get rid of Noriega because he stands in the way of those agreements. The charges of drug trafficking were fabricated out of whole cloth solely to justify his removal, as is proven by the fact that almost every single one of the leaders of the Panamanian opposition whom the United States wants to replace Noriega with, have been proven by U.S. law enforcement agencies to have been involved in drug trafficking and related activities. "Since Noriega is not controlled by either of the superpowers," wrote *EIR*'s Ibero-American Intelligence Director Robyn Quijano in the June 3, 1988 issue, "he presents a danger to the regional pacts agreed to by Reagan and Gorbachov."