

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

OAS gives lukewarm support to U.S.

The United States continues to behave as an international outlaw by authorizing the CIA to get Noriega—dead or alive.

The Organization of American States gave lukewarm support to the U.S. push against the commander of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega. In a vote taken early in the morning of Nov. 17, the OAS general commission approved 25-2, with 1 abstention, a resolution calling on Panama to stage "free elections" as soon as possible. The resolution was expected to be adopted by the hemisphere's foreign ministers before they concluded their annual General Assembly in Washington on Nov. 18.

Although afraid of openly bucking the U.S., the Ibero-Americans were not willing to give the Bush administration carte blanche to trample on a member country's sovereignty. According to Panamanian sources, most of the governments of the hemisphere agree with Panama's charges, that the U.S. attacks against Noriega are aimed at breaking the Panama Canal treaties and retaining control of U.S. military bases in Panama. They also agree that the charges that "Noriega is a drug trafficker," are lies invented to justify the U.S. offensive against Panama.

The Panamanian press gave widespread coverage to statements made by U.S. drug czar William Bennett, to the effect that the U.S. is not yet seriously waging a war on drugs. According to a UPI wire published by Panama's *Matutino* on Nov. 9, Bennett told the *San Jose Mercury* that U.S. leaders "lack the will" to wage a war on drugs. In the interview, Bennett also blasted former Secretary of State George Shultz—who launched the campaign against Noriega—for

having proposed the legalization of drugs.

For those reasons the OAS resolution fell far short of the demands made by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III, that the OAS set aside the principle of non-intervention in the case of Panama. The OAS also refused to go along with the proposals made on behalf of the United States by the socialist governments of Venezuela and Costa Rica, to condemn General Noriega by name, to repudiate Panama's current provisional government for "lacking constitutional legitimacy," and to demand that the countries of the hemisphere break diplomatic relations with Panama.

Panama will not abide even by the watered-down resolution, said Foreign Minister Leonardo Kam, "even if that means its expulsion from the OAS." The Panamanian foreign minister reminded his colleagues that Panama had indeed tried to hold "free and honest elections" last May, but U.S. interference forced the annulment of those elections. Kam cited the use of the U.S. Armed Forces Network, of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama, to promote the opposition's electoral campaign, the deployment of CIA agents to establish clandestine transmitters to incite riots, and the \$10 million that the Bush administration authorized the CIA to give to the Panamanian opposition, among the acts carried out by the U.S., which forced Panama to annul the elections.

He also charged that the sending of U.S. combat troops into Panama, and the U.S. economic sanctions, including the illegal confiscation of Pan-

amanian government funds in American banks, the takeover of Panama's embassy in Washington, the non-payment of taxes and the annuity due Panama from the canal, and the threats against Panamanian-flagged vessels, made elections impossible at this time.

Kam told the OAS that if they are "genuinely concerned with bringing democracy to Panama, you could make a valuable contribution to that process by demanding that the United States cease its aggression against Panama." Kam cited an article published by the *Los Angeles Times* on Nov. 16, reporting that "the Bush administration, with the secret approval of Congress, has launched a new covert operation to overthrow the commander of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, using methods that could lead to his death."

The cited article reported, "The CIA has been authorized \$3 million initially to recruit Panamanian military officers or other dissidents to mount a coup" against Noriega. In a monument to doublespeak, the latest CIA operation—dubbed Panama-5, a reference to the four previous U.S. efforts that have failed against the Panamanian nationalist leader—does not lift the ban on assassination of foreign leaders. But, reports the *Times*, it "opens the way for U.S. support—directly or indirectly—in coup attempts in which assassination is not the intent but may be the accidental byproduct." A source quoted by the *Times* noted that the Senate "intelligence committee gave the White House new flexibility on the assassination issue, which it needs to act in the future."

The more "flexible" interpretation on assassinations was requested by CIA head William Webster in the wake of the U.S. failed coup attempt against Noriega last Oct. 3.