

Civilian deaths in Panama prediscouted

by Leo F. Scanlon

At 0100 hours on the morning of Dec. 20, the United States military, principally the light infantry units of the U.S. Army, conducted a real-world version of a military exercise which has been in the training manuals and sandbox exercises at the Command and General Staff College for over 20 years. Inherent military problems associated with the execution of this plan indicate that the primary political objective of the President of the United States was to smash the government of Panama with a deadly show of military force, thus creating the conditions for the construction of a synthetic replacement. The new institution is to be grafted onto the Panamanian nation with the aid of a high-visibility U.S. military presence. The "capture" of Gen. Manuel Noriega is at most a secondary consideration in this scenario.

The success of this exercise is premised on the simultaneous deployment of forces sufficient to disperse the main concentrations of the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF), interdict or capture elite units which are capable of organizing urban guerrilla operations, and lay waste the neighborhoods (largely poor and black) from which the PDF and the government draw popular support. The enormous number of civilian casualties which resulted—much of the city was so destroyed that the true numbers may never be known—is a predicated feature of this plan.

Military gamble, high casualties

The means chosen to carry out the objectives of this operation included the mobilization of the 13,000 U.S. troops in place in Panama, combined with an additional 10,000 combatants, most of whom were air-dropped in during the early morning hours of Dec. 20. The in place forces are primarily the 193rd Infantry Brigade, which in recent months had been reinforced by Marine units, a battalion from the 7th Infantry Division at Fort Ord, California, a mechanized battalion from the 5th Infantry Division at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and additional military police units. Additional forces included a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, two ranger battalions, and selected special operating units. Several days after the beginning of the invasion, 2,000 additional troops, including many Military Police units, were added to the force, and 8,000 more were put on alert, readied to supplement or replace the main force.

The fundamental military problem facing the planners of

this invasion is the geography of the area around Panama City, which makes it impossible to cut off access to the adjacent mountainous areas, thus guaranteeing that significant elements of the PDF would be able to reach the jungle sanctuary and regroup for partisan action against the occupiers. That is, in fact, exactly what occurred on some scale.

Army Lt. Gen. Tom Kelly of the Joint Chiefs of Staff described the situation on Dec. 21: "Our plan is to take the area from Río Hato on the west to Cimarrón on the east, which is where the preponderance of PDF forces were, and to reduce them. That is what we've done. . . . They, as far as we know, melted away in that they're not there [i.e., the PDF had abandoned their fixed positions—ed.]

have a definitive answer as to where they went or what they're doing. . . . Some of them have gone out of town. Some of them stayed in."

This situation brings up the second basic military difficulty with this invasion—the necessity of house-to-house fighting in Panama City itself, with its inevitably high casualties, both military and civilian. Theoretically, control of the capital would have to be secured, and organized opposition destroyed, before troops could be redeployed to support operations against PDF units in the jungle areas. Since this feat was never accomplished in Saigon even after 15 years of war, the prospects for a quick military resolution of the situation were non-existent by the second day of the invasion.

According to military specialists who have studied the invasion plan, there has always been one way to minimize military casualties under these conditions—cordon off areas of the city and simply shoot anything that shows resistance—and this solution had been consequently considered unacceptable.

Populated areas targeted

Nonetheless, since minimizing U.S. casualties was a political priority, this very course was, in effect, carried out through the use of sophisticated close air-support assets, along with artillery barrages directed at the populous, poor neighborhoods of Chorrillo and San Miguelito.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Colin Powell described the forces involved in what was called the "Task Force Bayonet" area in central Panama City. "Task Force Bayonet consisted of a mechanized battalion, the force of the 6th Mechanized. It also was supported by a platoon of light tanks as well as the 5th Battalion of the 87th Infantry. The mission . . . was to seize the Comandancia, the headquarters of the PDF, General Noriega's headquarters. . . . They have accomplished that mission. The headquarters has been reduced. There has been considerable burning. I'm not quite sure how much of it has been burned out, but there has been quite a bit of fire down there . . . and some of the PDF members have now slipped out and are mixing in with the general population. So there will still be a need for mopping up and stability operations."

Bush names drug mob capos to rule Panama

The new "government" sworn into office by the U.S. Army in Panama at midnight on Dec. 19, is headed by three opposition leaders connected to the drug trade.

Named President by the United States was Guillermo Endara. Endara is a business partner of a leader of the Panamanian opposition caught red-handed in the dope trade, Carlos Eleta Almarán. Endara owns significant stock in, and sits on the board of Harinas Panama, S.A.; Eleta is the company's president and founder. Eleta was arrested on April 1989 in Macon, Georgia by U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration personnel, and charged with conspiring to import 600 kilos of cocaine per month into the United States, and planning to set up shell companies in Panama to launder the estimated \$300 million in drug profits. Two associates of Eleta's who were arrested in the same scheme, have since pleaded guilty to all charges. Eleta remains free on \$8 million bail pending trial.

Sworn in as First Vice President was Ricardo Arias Calderón, secretary general of the Christian Democratic Party, whose brother is one of Panama's prominent bankers, Jaime Arias Calderón. The Arias Calderón connection to drug money centers around the now-closed First Interamericas bank owned by Colombian drug kingpin Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, and Banco Continental de Panamá.

First Interamericas was ordered closed by Panamanian banking authorities on March 1, 1985, after the bank was caught laundering drug money, when it was discovered that Rodríguez Orejuela was the major shareholder.

Jaime Arias Calderón is also one of the owners of Banco Continental, which has served as a conduit for

financing the election campaigns of the Christian Democratic party headed by his brother Ricardo Arias Calderón. In 1985, a captured Colombian drug-runner confessed that he had laundered some \$40 million for the Cali, Colombia cocaine cartel through the Banco Continental with the full knowledge of another opposition leader who sat on the board of Banco Continental.

Completing the governing team the United States installed in office on Dec. 19, is Second Vice-President Guillermo "Billy" Ford, a banker who is up to his elbows in drug money-laundering. Ford and two political associates, Carlos Rodríguez and Roberto Eisenmann, own the Dadeland National Bank in Miami, Florida, a bank which was revealed in 1985 to have served as a laundromat for one of the largest marijuana-smuggling rings ever caught in the United States. (Ford's associate, Eisenmann, also sits on the board of Banco Continental).

Dadeland National's ties to the dope mafia came to light during the trial of the Antonio ("Tony") Fernández drug syndicate, a ring which confessed to smuggling more than 1.5 million pounds of marijuana into the United States. The Fernández ring began buying stock in Dadeland National as far back as 1976; by 1984, the gang owned 9,900 shares of stock in Ford's Dadeland bank. One of the gang's money launderers, Iván Robles—a political associate of Guillermo Ford since the mid-1970s—was employed as an assistant at Dadeland National Bank during the period he served as the mafia's courier. He testified at the trial that he and others had also stashed part of their dope earnings in a lock box held at Dadeland National.

Earlier in 1989, U.S. authorities announced a list of American banks under investigation for money laundering activities. Among the banks listed was Dadeland, co-owned by Ford, Eisenmann, and Carlos Rodríguez.

Rodríguez, who continues to be the chief executive officer of Dadeland, was personally greeted Dec. 22 by President George Bush as Endara's envoy to the United States.

These operations consisted of reducing the surrounding blocks to a condition that one ABC News reporter described as "like Berlin in '45"—complete rubble. Combat operations were not halted in order to dig out the dead and wounded civilians, which the Pentagon refused to even mention.

As-house-to-house fighting began, the artillery bombardment was replaced by A-7 fighter bombers and the awesome firepower of AC-130 gunships (known as "Puff the Magic Dragon" in Vietnam), which were brought in to provide tactical air support for the urban skirmishing.

The amount of property destroyed and lives wasted by

this strategy was foreseen by responsible military commanders who opposed the plan, including former JCS Chairman Adm. William Crowe, who deplored the prospect of American boys coming home in body-bags, and Gen. Frederick Woerner, who was fired as head of the Southern Command because of his opposition to an invasion. His replacement, Gen. Maxwell Thurman, has taken credit for "selling" the strategy. Ironically, he is famed for his success as a marketing specialist, having recruited the volunteer Army with the slogan, "Be all you can be," a phrase that will have new meaning in Ibero-America.