

---

## Interview: Nils Castro

---

# The real U.S. strategic aims in Panama

by Carlos Wesley

*Nils Castro is secretary for international affairs and a member of the political leadership of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) of Panama. He is also vice president of the Permanent Conference of Latin American Political Parties (COPPAL), and member of the executive committee of the Latin American Association of Human Rights (ALDH). He was one of the intellectuals who collaborated closely with Gen. Omar Torrijos, and was also an adviser on foreign relations to various Presidents of the Republic of Panama. He is currently living in exile in Mexico, where he coordinates the office which represents the Panamanian national resistance and the PRD abroad. What follows is the second part of a two-part interview, continued from last week.*

**EIR:** One of President Bush's justifications for the invasion of Panama is that he was fighting against the drug trade. What can you tell us about this?

**Castro:** It has already been made abundantly clear in the pre-trial proceedings in Miami that there is much more propagandistic substance to that trial than judicial substance. At the same time, the use of that pretext to carry out operations of this sort constitutes a de facto threat to the majority of Latin American countries, since these pretexts prefabricated by the media evidently hide intentions of control, of military intervention of another sort. I believe that what best symbolizes the nature of how these kinds of pretexts are being used is the spectacular case of the alleged cocaine cache discovered in General Noriega's office, which turned out later to be Christmas tamales. Everything seems to indicate that in the course of this judicial process, many more tamales are going to come to light.

**EIR:** You say that the invasion was neither to end drug trafficking nor to reestablish democracy and respect for human rights. Why, then, did the United States decide to carry out this military action against Panama?

**Castro:** I believe that the United States sought two fundamental objectives in Panama, above and beyond General Noriega's surrender. These were: to destroy the Panamanian Defense Forces and to impose a puppet government fundamentally charged with destroying the liberationist or *Torrijos-*

*ta* forces in Panama in their entirety. The destruction of the Panamanian Defense Forces had the purpose of eliminating the one instrument upon which the Republic relied to be able to fulfill its military responsibilities in Panama, in executing the Canal treaties. As you may know, the Panama Canal treaties prescribe that during the 20 years between 1979 and 1999, protection and defense of the Canal will be a joint responsibility of the forces of both countries, which cannot act independently during that period. But those responsibilities, said the treaties, were to be carried out in such a manner that U.S. participation would decrease so that the last U.S. soldier would leave the country on the last day of the century, and that Panamanian participation would increase so that on the first day of the new century, the entire responsibility would lie exclusively with Panama.

Unfortunately, the treaties also prescribe that in case Panama does not construct the necessary force to guarantee fulfillment of this canal security function, then U.S. troops will remain. The invasion was intended to destroy the Panamanian military institution, and to deprive the national state of its capability to carry out this function and, in that way, to guarantee the permanence of U.S. military bases and forces beyond the year 2000.

It is revealing that one of the first statements made by Mr. Endara, after assuming power at Fort Clayton, was precisely to state that Panama could rent the military bases to the United States as of Jan. 1, 2000. Thus it was clearly established that the principal U.S. objective, beyond retaining the canal, is that of holding onto a complex or system of military bases constructed around the canal, not for the purpose of protecting the waterway but to take advantage of the capacity of that system of bases for rapid deployment of conventional forces. That is, as a system for intervention and control of countries in the Caribbean and Latin America. Or, as some official U.S. literature says, to keep the bases for what they call "hemispheric projection."

**EIR:** Can you tell us why the United States would want to attack Latin American countries at this time? That is, if they were prepared to abandon the bases in 1979, why has the political line changed?

**Castro:** In 1979, the world geopolitical and geostrategic situation was different. In 1979, relations between the United States and Soviet Union, and therefore also U.S. relations in Asia and Europe, were based on the philosophy of mutually assured destruction, and thus on strategic weapons. . . . Thus the military bases in Panama [were seen by White House and Pentagon strategists] as a system that was perhaps obsolete and whose gradual extinction could be accepted, since in the framework of strategic nuclear relations between the superpowers, these bases were of secondary importance, and were remnants of the geostrategic situation of the World War II era.

But, during the following 10 years, U.S. military philosophy radically changed. To the extent that agreements with the Soviet Union were becoming feasible, and the realities in Eastern Europe and in Asia were changing, bases that had an apparently secondary value 10 years earlier, took on new importance as bases intended for the domination of areas of influence, regional domination. Concretely, those of Panama. Once the agreements between Washington and Moscow were struck, the bases located in Panama took on a new relevance as bases for intervention and control of the Latin American region.

There's another factor at play here, and that is that during the same period, a generalized economic crisis occurred, the crisis of the foreign debt and U.S. manipulation of the renegotiation process with the Latin American countries, as an instrument of political hegemony. At the present time, it is clear how the United States has restructured its relations with the neocolonial periphery of this continent, by collecting tribute. But also, by taking this practice to the extreme, it is equally clear that symptoms of rebellion are beginning to appear in a Latin America overwhelmed by the debt, by the devastating use of that instrument of political hegemony and curtailment of sovereignty which is the manipulation of financial renegotiation and imposition of new economic structures.

Everything appears to suggest that the military bases in Panama take on a new strategic value within this framework. They are bases intended to threaten and, eventually, as in the case of Panama, to intervene in the Latin American process of recovery of sovereignty and self-determination, and in the process by which Latin America could reclaim its new independence.

**EIR:** Can you tell us what Ibero-America's reaction has been to this invasion, and what kind of support or lack of support has been shown regarding the invasion and the resistance?

**Castro:** First of all, the resistance must be carried out primarily inside the country, principally through the mobilization of social, political, labor, and cultural organizations. We have scarcely begun to put together a system to represent the voice of the resistance abroad. We can say that we have

found warm and widespread solidarity everywhere in Latin America. At the level of governments, they have responded in a way that has not been seen before. If we compare this response with previous such situations, like the invasion of Grenada where the reactions were low-key, or the invasion of the Dominican Republic, where there was overt complicity with the invaders on the part of the majority of the Latin American governments, we see that there has been a change, and a drastic one, on the part of Latin America toward these policies. The Latin American response has been unanimously or nearly unanimously condemnatory. This is expressed in the enormous, in the profound isolation in which the puppet regime finds itself, only recognized by a minuscule group of less important countries. The Latin American attitude is clearly seen in the action of the Latin American Group (GRULA) in the United Nations, the OAS, the Group of Eight.

One must say, nonetheless, that these government-level reactions, although they have been sufficiently clear, have been clearly insufficient. Latin America, on the government level, has a responsibility, has a moral duty, and the duty to protect itself by presenting much more decisive and concrete action in solidarity with the recovery of Panamanian sovereignty and democracy, because it is Latin America itself which is threatened by this United States adventure in Panama.

On the other hand, at the level of social, labor, cultural organizations, political parties, etc., Latin American solidarity with Panama is much more decisive and much more eloquent. In the majority of the continent, there have been proclamations, demonstrations of all sorts, such as the recent "Tamales Rally" that a Mexican group held in front of the United States embassy.

**EIR:** Finally, how do you evaluate the reaction of the United States population to the invasion?

**Castro:** The American people have been massively deceived by an inflammatory and persistent media campaign to justify a contemptible and evil operation such as that carried out to suppress Panamanian sovereignty and democracy. Nonetheless, we and our people have infinite confidence in the American people's ability to rise above this deception to which they have been subjected. Among those American citizens we have come to know, we have found the generosity, the willingness to understand this kind of Latin American situation, when we are given the opportunity to explain it to them.

I believe that in the end truth will shine forth, and that in our struggle for sovereignty and democracy we will increasingly find support from important sectors of the American citizenry, and a return to dignity which will prove as decisive for them as for ourselves. If we are subjected to the indignity of the occupation, the people of the United States have also, against their will, been subjected to the indignity of being occupiers.