

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Bush called to account for holocaust

As the bodies of Panamanians killed in the invasion are unearthed, the Nuremberg precedent is being invoked.

Seventy Panamanian victims of the U.S. invasion of last Dec. 20, have filed a complaint with the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The complaint, filed on May 10, requests that the OAS hold the U.S. liable for "the loss of life and emotional and physical injuries inflicted on Panamanian civilians, as well as the resulting destruction of homes and other property."

Lawyers for the Center for Constitutional Rights, an American human rights organization that is assisting the Panamanian victims, said that they want the Inter-American Commission to conduct an independent investigation to determine the "full extent of losses and damages," caused by the invasion. They also want the commission to establish that the U.S. should pay \$250 million to the victims.

"We would hope that this complaint . . . would result in some sort of process in which indemnification can be obtained, not only for the named individuals, but for all of the Panamanians who have suffered the tragic consequences of the invasion," said attorney Luis Morin of the Center for Constitutional Rights, at a May 10 press conference in Washington. "The signal that we have received so far," he said, "is that the U.S. is denying all responsibility, legally, to provide any indemnification, and that is what has prompted us to take this action."

Morin said the compensation sought would be exclusively for victims, and has nothing to do with \$420 million in so-called aid Congress is considering for Panama. That money, if approved, will go to the U.S.-in-

stalled government not to victims. He cited the case of El Chorrillo, a neighborhood that was flattened by the invasion. "What is being talked about in terms of construction there, is not homes for the people left homeless from that destruction, but a tourist center."

He said that there were several precedents for seeking such redress. The postwar Nuremberg Tribunal, at which Nazi Germany's crimes against humanity and violations of international law were condemned, were an "analogous situation," said Morin.

In the case of Panama, the U.S. violated the OAS Charter, of which it is a signatory. Article 18 of the Charter states, "No state or group of states has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other state," while Article 20 establishes that "the territory of a state is inviolable; it may not be the object, even temporarily, of military occupation or other measures of force taken by another state."

Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark hailed the filing as "an important step to redress the great losses, in both life and property, suffered by tens of thousands of Panamanian families." In a statement read at the news conference, Clark said, "It is a shame, however, that the victims of this invasion must turn to an international forum outside the U.S. to redress their grievances. . . . Real and full justice in Panama requires not only that the victims of the U.S. military action be compensated. It demands that the U.S. occupation and intervention in Panama be ended,

once and for all."

Luisa de Lee, one of the 70 victims said she and her family were left homeless when U.S. helicopters, without provocation, fired missiles at the apartment building where she lived in the city of Colón. "On Dec. 22, my family and I were in the dining room of our apartment. We felt the impact of a missile hitting the roof of the building. We were all hurt: My 6-year-old daughter lost her left eye; my 5-year-old son has had to undergo a brain operation; my 3-year-old son suffered wounds to his stomach and his head; and my month-and-a-half-old baby boy suffered severe burns. I myself suffered a cut on my arm that took 56 stitches to close, and I have not recovered."

José Isabel Salas, a senior citizen who lived in a nearby building, said his wife was killed by a helicopter-fired missile on Dec. 22, as she prepared to cook supper. "Her body was completely mutilated," he said. "It is our custom to bathe and dress the dead before burial. But when we went to the funeral home, the owner told us, 'we can't change her clothing.' placed her in a bag, and then put the bag in the coffin, and that is how we buried her."

In Panama, families of those who died during the invasion are exhuming the bodies from common graves to give them a Christian burial, in a process that is taking place every Saturday. On May 5, the second time bodies were exhumed from the grave at Jardín de Paz, 93 bodies were found, bringing the total from just that one site—one of several—to 123. The press is estimating that as many as 4,000 bodies will be found when the process is completed. Among the bodies unearthed, several were bound hand and foot. This, reported the daily *El Siglo* on May 7, "indicates that they did not die in combat, but were killed in cold blood" by U.S. soldiers.