

armies of the region are as much a cause of civil war, as the insurgents. "The proliferation of weapons and the size of national [military] forces has contributed significantly over the decade to regional insecurity. Development of smaller, apolitical and professional forces can meet the threat posed by insurgent forces better than large, offensive forces"—language lifted from the script which prepared the elimination of the Panamanian Defense Forces.

The *Los Angeles Times* piece specified that any idea that supporting the anti-drug war will get around this commitment is an illusion. "As we move into the drug war in Central America, we must be careful not to nurture anti-democratic elements in the military who want to use drug trafficking like they used communism to justify doing as they please," an unnamed U.S. official told the paper. The preferred agency for the "anti-drug war" in the region is the Costa Rican narcotics police, currently being trained by U.S. Special Forces.

Panama: test case for dismantling military

by Carlos Wesley

When George Bush ordered the invasion of Panama last Dec. 20, one of his chief aims was to destroy Panama's Defense Forces (PDF). As a military force, the PDF was not very impressive, but it was developing the capability to fulfill its primary mission: to be ready by the year 2000 "to protect and defend the Panama Canal."

That was an obligation assumed by Panama when it signed the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Panama Canal treaties, under which full control of the waterway is supposed to revert from the United States to the Republic of Panama by the year 2000. In 1984, when Gen. Manuel Noriega became the commander of what was then the National Guard, he initiated the organizing of a modern, professional military force to ensure that Panama could comply with the defense commitments imposed by the treaties.

By the time of the invasion, Panama had organized two battalions—"Batallón 2000" and "Batallón Paz"—and some additional infantry and other specialized companies, for a total "Army Battle Order" of around 4,500 men. An estimated 1,000 additional men were distributed between Panama's fledgling Air Force and Navy. The Air Force was equipped with helicopters and passenger planes, but no combat aircraft. The Navy's total "combat capability" consisted of five coastal patrol boats. The rest of the 14,000-person PDF were not fighting men, but customs agents, secretaries, homicide investigators, traffic cops, patrolmen, and so forth.

The PDF had no artillery. There were about a score of

vintage armored personnel carriers, but no tanks, no rocket launchers, and no anti-aircraft batteries.

Destroying the PDF

Although for two years prior to the invasion, U.S. administration officials repeatedly said that their fight was only with Noriega, not with the PDF, and even as the invasion was getting under way, George Bush took to the airwaves to assure the Panamanians that once Noriega was out of the way, "we have no continuing axe to grind with the PDF," it was the PDF as an institution which was targeted for destruction. As drawn up by Gen. Maxwell Thurman, the invasion plans called for "not only the capture of Noriega, but destruction of his entire military command structure, through attacks on 27 different locations."

A week after the invasion, the U.S.-installed President of Panama, Guillermo "Porky" Endara, announced on U.S. orders that Panama's constitution would be amended to forever ban an army.

In a May 24 speech at the Panamanian oligarchy's watering hole, the Union Club, the head of U.S. Army South, Gen. Marc Cisneros, said: "I don't believe there is any need for an army here." Panama "does not have to worry about being invaded by anyone," said Cisneros, who commanded the U.S. ground forces on Dec. 20. To replace the PDF, a new constabulary was established, the Public Force. Lt. Gen. Carl Stiner, operational commander of the invasion forces, announced that the new force "will be armed only with shotgun and pistols."

Although many officers and most men of the extinct PDF were at first incorporated into the new Public Force—"we didn't want them to become guerrillas," explained Roberto Azbat, the new chief of the constabulary—almost all of the former PDF officers have since been purged and replaced by people trained by the U.S. Department of Justice. Panamanians currently studying at military academies abroad will not be allowed to serve in the Public Force.

To reinforce the anti-military policy, the U.S.-installed government has instructed all foreign governments to recall their military attachés. Henceforth, Panama will only allow police attachés to be accredited as diplomats.

The Public Force numbers a total of 12,000 members, of whom a very small number, about 100 or so, have been organized into a SWAT-type unit, supposedly to fight drugs and deal with subversion. The remainder have been stripped of patrol cars, even of flashlights. In the town of Puerto Armuelles, Public Force officers were issued bicycles to carry out their patrols. The government announced that it is selling off the helicopters and other aircraft from the former PDF—as part of its policy of privatizing all state-owned property. The U.S. confiscated all the PDF patrol vessels, and is now demanding that Panama sign a treaty allowing the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard to patrol Panama's territorial waters for drugs because Panama no longer has the resources to do so.