
Interview: Panamanian Minister Elmo Martínez Blanco

Panama was gaining economic and political independence

Elmo Martínez Blanco was Panama's Minister of Industry and Commerce at the time of the U.S. invasion on Dec. 20, 1989. He was interviewed by Christine Bierre of the EIR Paris office while he was attending a November conference organized by the international Commission to Investigate Human Rights Violations, to demand freedom for U.S. statesman Lyndon H. LaRouche.

EIR: What was the real reason behind the U.S. invasion and occupation of Panama?

Martínez: It seems clear that the intentions of the United States are not what they have claimed. It is obvious that one does not send 25,000 troops sophisticatedly armed, besides the 18,000 troops they had in the country, to capture one man they have claimed to be a drug dealer, and in the process kill 6-7,000 Panamanians. This seems totally absurd. So the reasons have to be found in the intimate interest of the U.S. concerning their permanence in Panama.

The U.S. military interests in the country are very high. They have bases which they didn't want to leave; they had made requests that we had denied. So, in fact, they were aware that we were not necessarily obedient to their desires and therefore it was important for them to make drastic changes concerning not only the military forces in the country, but also the government forces, to achieve the "collaboration" they needed to remain in the country as long as they wanted.

EIR: One of the reasons for the invasion is the Panama Canal treaty; some say that the U.S. never really intended to grant the canal to the Panamanians. I think you knew well Gen. Omar Torrijos who negotiated the Panama Canal treaty with President Jimmy Carter, and I think you had followed this question very closely at that time. What can you tell us about this issue?

Martínez: You recall to my memory an incident in which I think one gets clearly the feeling of the Panamanian military. Once the treaty was signed, General Torrijos came to Stockholm, Sweden, where I was the Ambassador of the Republic of Panama, and I congratulated him for having achieved the very difficult task of making the Americans sign the treaty. And he told me, "Yes, in fact, Elmo, this has been very difficult, very difficult indeed to make Americans sign the

treaty. But now comes the most difficult part. How are we going to make the Americans respect the treaty?"

I think you get a clear picture of the fact that military men in my country and others, were never too sure that the U.S. had the character or the ethics to comply with an obligation they had contracted after many years of negotiations. On the other hand, when General Torrijos said "the worst part comes now"—how do we make the United States respect this treaty—we have to remember that it was Gen. Manuel Noriega who inherited that particularly difficult role, and therefore he must have felt a very difficult situation and the need to operate in very strange ways to be able to carry this out with the U.S. all the way to the year 2000, when they had to definitely leave the country.

EIR: The United States always pretended that the Panamanian people would be incapable of defending the Panama Canal, which is of strategic importance for them, but I seem to remember that General Torrijos had proposed another plan whereby many nations would be granted strips of land around the canal and would be able to participate in a system of guarantees for the security of the canal area. As far as I understand, the United States had rejected this proposal.

Martínez: I don't know if he proposed it publicly, but I can say that he had a plan. Neutrality was very important for us, precisely because we are aware, as is the United States, that this canal is not militarily defensible. This canal is operated with a system of locks, and it just takes one seaman to blow the canal with a bomb. So, if you have 45 vessels going through every day and you figure out that every vessel might have 20 men or more aboard, you have quite a lot of men a day that can do it. So, this canal in reality is not defensible. General Torrijos said once during a conversation, the Americans keep talking about the defense of the canal and the best defense is neutrality.

We are and should be a neutral country and we should offer every country in the world a piece of land along each side of the canal so that every country in the world, small, large, powerful or weak, could have an embassy, a consulate, a commercial office, or whatever. This is the sense of neutrality that we can give to the canal, and this sense of neutrality would conform to our emblem which shows an eagle with nine stars on top, symbolizing the nine provinces, and a

ribbon where one can read *pro mundi beneficus*—that means “for the benefit of the world,” and I think that that mentality has been carried out through the years conforming to the idea of neutral Panama.

EIR: Can you tell us what happened in Panama during the night of the American invasion on Dec. 20, 1989? The American-dominated media has tried to portray the idea of a “clean” surgical intervention, where “only” 23 U.S. soldiers were killed. That seems to be far from the truth. You were there that night; can you tell us what you saw?

Martínez: The invasion was a dirty business. It was an inhuman act where 25,000 soldiers, added to the 18,000 they had in the country in 14 military bases, invaded the country from within since they were already inside the country in those military bases. All they had to do was to receive the 25,000 additional troops, and then from these bases launch a surprise attack at midnight when everybody was asleep, with very sophisticated weapons, with high-pressure bombs.

It was a tremendous act of destruction and killing where 6-7,000 people died, where wounded people were burned alive with these flame-throwers, prisoners shot in the head while their hands had been bound behind their backs. We have found them and showed them to the world in mass graves. We have found many mass graves. When I was in prison in a concentration camp, I got information concerning these mass graves from some of the prisoners who were there. Later, we located and opened some of them and found many hundreds of Panamanians killed that way.

We are still looking, but unfortunately the present government, which is very obedient to U.S. dictates, has not made one single attempt to discover or uncover any of these graves. So it has to be done by our efforts, efforts of some organizations in Panama such as the one headed by Mrs. Isabel Corro, who very courageously has worked against all odds to be able to locate these graves, to open them, and to successfully find many, many dead Panamanians civilians—children, women, men.

It is understood that they used during this invasion weapons that had not been used before in any war; they talk about Stealth fighter planes, about remote control helicopters with no pilots in them, we are talking about laser rays which come into houses through the walls and destroy everything inside, melt everything. It was horrible, horrible destruction, with no concern for children, for women, for anything. That is why it becomes peculiar to hear Mr. Bush talk about how intolerable the idea of Saddam Hussein mistreating children is for him. It seems incredible that this man has the stomach to stand up there while not concerned about the 6,000 Panamanians who had died and how they were killed.

The operation was horribly done. Soldiers were very careless, very nervous. They had obviously been told that the Panamanian Army was very capable, but that made them so nervous that they shot anything that moved. If a lady

moved to her car, they shot her. If a young boy ran across the street, they would also kill him even if he was only 4 years old. There were many acts that showed tremendous nervousness and incapacity as soldiers.

EIR: The hypocrisy of the United States is indeed outrageous, when you think that months after they invaded your country, they are still occupying it. We hear that they have people controlling every aspect of the country, that the banking system is not free, etc., and many other aspects of life. Can you tell us more about this?

Martínez: Panama is an occupied country, and in every ministry there are two Americans who serve as advisers for checking all things that are happening so that things are not done without their consent. The airport, all the state institutions, they are there, so Panama is a totally occupied country. And, of course, you have to realize that is what they like in the present government, because it is made out of men who see the presence of American soldiers in Panama as a guarantee for the well-being of their business. Unfortunately for them, the people are awakening from a nightmare, from a shock, and every day more voices of protest are heard in the cities. You have three, four, five demonstrations in the streets every day. Blockades here, blockades there. People in the streets, sometimes 60,000 people have been able to demonstrate, sometimes smaller, but in a day, there can be three or four of these things going on all over the city.

So this government is sitting in a very delicate situation. No one believes this can last very long, but the question is how the United States would do it to change again this government without getting involved once again. . . . Sooner or later the people of the United States will protest about what happened in Panama.

EIR: You seem confident that the Panamanian people will be able to regain independence. . . .

Martínez: Oh yes, yes. Ever since I was taken as a prisoner of war and sent to this concentration camp, I made it clear even to the Americans: Okay, you feel big, you feel strong today, but remember that with time and distance the people of Panama will rise. Some of them perhaps did feel that you were some sort of liberators for them, but, in the great majority, within a month these people will not be applauding; within four months they will not be looking at you; and within eight months, they might be throwing stones; and within one year they will be fighting against you. So, in that sense, I believe that will be the reaction of the people of Panama, especially because there had been, from both parts, from the side of the government of Panama and that of the United States, many promises which have not been complied with.

I remember one. Before the Panamanian elections, Ambassador Arthur Davis, who was the U.S. ambassador in Panama, publicly said on TV and radio that once the government of Panama fell, the United States, conscious of the fact



Delegates from all over the Americas visited the tomb of the charismatic national hero, General Omar Torrijos Herrera, on Aug. 8, 1988. The visitors were in Panama City for the Encounter for a Second Amphictyonic Conference, convened to fight for the sovereignty of Ibero-American nations in the Torrijos tradition.

Carlos Martínez

that their sanctions were hurting the Panamanian economy and hurting the poor Panamanian people, would immediately invest \$3 billion in Panama. He repeated this several times. . . . After the new government took power, after the invasion, the \$3 billion became \$2 billion, which later became \$1 billion, which later became \$420 million of which \$180 million had to be taken for debt repayments and \$20 million was going to be given to Panama, and the rest was subject to the signing by Panama with the United States of a treaty of mutual legal assistance, which gives the U.S. the power to go into Panamanian banks and check everybody's account, thereby destroying one of the strongest pillars of our country, our banking center.

They have aimed at destroying the economy of Panama so that Panama becomes more susceptible concerning their permanence in the country. That is why they destroyed all the stores. They accused the Dignity Battalions, but what they don't say is that it was Puerto Ricans and Mexicans of their Army, who destroyed those shops, disguised as Dignity Battalions. We have proof of that, we have photos of certain things, and even testimony of people who heard what happened, very close to Puerto Ricans who are in the American Army.

So it is obvious that they had every intention, while coming into Panama, first to get rid of the government because it was not obedient, and to get rid of the Army because it was wedded to the people and therefore it had to be destroyed

totally—not just General Noriega, that was not sufficient.

That was the reason why they did not catch Noriega by himself; they had to come into Panama to destroy the whole Army. That is why you see that they constantly play the role of protectors of Panama through democratic institutions which do not exist, because everybody knows that it is not democracy they are looking for but obedience, and they had not found it from the government, from the Army, or from anybody who had anything to say in the country.

EIR: You worked closely with General Torrijos and General Noriega. Both these military men were loved by the Panamanian people, a situation which is very different than in many other Ibero-American countries where you often have agents of brutal oligarchical elites ruling the countries. Where does this republican tradition in the Panamanian military come from?

Martínez: We did not have an army for many years because the 1903 treaty with the United States prohibited an army. We only had a police force where policemen were only allowed to carry a stick, which was not enough to do anything. They became an arm of the oligarchy which was governing the country.

However, through the years, the police were in the hands of very humble people coming from very humble origins since the aristocracy never sent their children there. Later on, when this developed into the military, it was then too late

for the oligarchy to be part of it. When Torrijos took power, he posed the question, "Why are we serving the oligarchy against the people when we are the people?" So it became a sort of marriage between the Armed Forces and the people where the oligarchy was left out, so politically they lost power. They were not attacked, they were not robbed of their wealth. Quite the contrary, they became richer because there was more commercial and economic activity in the country so they became more powerful. But they had a desire to come back to power, and they wedded the U.S. interests to provoke the fall of the Noriega government.

Now Torrijos was a charismatic man, loved by the people because he was a simple man who used to go to the country, talk to the people, sit under the trees with them—he was a man of a simple life. When he died, you could see the proof of that, the whole country cried for him. With Noriega it was something different because, remember, Noriega was the chief of what was called the G2, that is, the intelligence department of the Armed Forces, and these men are usually very mysterious, and people do not perceive them in the same way.

Noriega never did become the charismatic, sympathetic man of the people, but was the man who was intelligent enough to keep the United States in check for a long time. Once the United States found out that Noriega was not their man, but a man who possibly would be the biggest obstacle they would find in trying to remain in Panama, they disposed of him. The strategy they used against him, I don't know. Did they set him up? Did they try to trap him? Their accusations have to be proven. I met the man, I knew him, I never heard of anything illegal or dirty that he had done. Every man responds for himself, I respond for myself, I cannot respond for him. But if I have to say how I knew him, I will say I knew him as a correct man, and many of the things that have been said of him to me are a surprise.

So up to now I must wait and see what is happening, because to begin with, to catch one man is not a reason to destroy a country. On the other hand, not even catching him seems to be justified, because apparently if they were in so much hurry to get him, it's because they had sufficient proof. They are still spending time and money to try to involve everybody and looking for people that can say bad things about him, to take him to trial. It seems to me, if you have foolproof evidence of the guilt of a man, why waste so much time and money of the taxpayers of the U.S. to continue to search for it?

EIR: The violence of the attack against Panama reminds me of the hatred of Kissinger against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan, whom he actually had condemned and executed as a bloody example for other Third World leaders who would try to be somewhat independent. What the American oligarchy really couldn't stand in the case of Panama, Pakistan, or other countries, is the fact that Third World countries would

be able to stand on their own feet.

Martínez: Yes, I think that you have hit the nail right on the head because, in reality, one of the reasons that I think the U.S. found it difficult to live with us is that we were on our way to really standing on our own feet. And the policy of our government ever since Torrijos took over was to try to get ourselves an independent country and to do that which you have to do to become economically independent.

You have to try to live with what you have and use what you have properly. And I think a proof of that was the many things that were built in the country such as highways, hospitals, aqueducts, and schools, and all on the basis of loans that we had to request. But it was done in cooperation with other countries in Europe, 99% of our projects were realized with European or Asian countries, not with the United States, so the whole picture had changed and that was not acceptable for them.

We were in the process of designing a consolidation of our economic system of service economy, which would have put us as a very independent country with the use of different currencies in the country which would have made us independent from the dollar. All these things of course contributed to the fact that the United States saw the possibility of negotiating with us their continued presence in the country as something impossible, and therefore they had to change it for this obedience that they require.

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