

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Just why did Bush invade Panama?

The key U.S. prosecution witness says there is "nothing that incriminates Noriega" in the captured documents.

On Dec. 8, U.S. government agents raided the home of José Isabel Blandón and seized documents, computer disks, and a fax machine. The next day, according to the Dec. 9 *Washington Post*, they searched his safe deposit box.

Who is José Blandón?

Well, he used to be Panama's consul general in New York until he turned against Gen. Manuel Noriega in 1988. Since then, he has been the U.S. government's chief witness against Noriega, and the only one who is not a convicted felon . . . yet.

So why is the prosecution persecuting its own witness? Apparently, prosecutors suspect that Blandón was the one who leaked the tapes of the privileged conversations between Noriega and his attorneys to Cable News Network. The CNN broadcast of those tapes was the subject of a big brouhaha that went all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. Forgotten in the controversy about CNN's First Amendment rights to broadcast the tapes, was the violation of Noriega's Sixth Amendment rights that took place when the government monitored Noriega's calls with his lawyers.

Blandón told the Dec. 9 *Washington Post* that he was contracted by the prosecution to listen to the tapes (which were in Spanish). Blandón "provided a written summary of the tapes for Noriega prosecutor Patrick Sullivan," the *Post* reported. Blandón said that "the summary referred to several calls between Noriega and the office of his Miami defense attorney, Frank Rubino." Blandón also said he

personally "discussed this with" Sullivan.

This assertion contradicts claims made by the prosecution in a motion filed with Judge William Hoeveller on Dec. 7. The government then argued that Noriega was at fault for not following the procedure of telling prison officials he was calling his lawyers to discuss privileged legal matters (despite the fact that all of Noriega's calls were dialed by prison officials). Further, the prosecutors claim that they "took steps to ensure that they would not 'inadvertently obtain' calls between Noriega and his lawyers."

Miami criminal lawyer Neal Sonnett said that Blandón could be disqualified as a witness, reported the Dec. 14 *New York Times*. That would be an almost fatal blow to the prosecution, given Blandón's importance to the government's case against Noriega.

One of the names Blandón got from Noriega's taped calls was that of former Panamanian Defense Forces Lt. Col Luis del Cid, who pled guilty on Dec. 6 to delivering drug dollars to Noriega. Before copping the plea, Del Cid was facing a 70-year prison term. But the deal the government offered him was "very appealing," said his lawyer, Samuel Burstyn, who noted that the government has been offering to let drug traffickers go free if they offer any kernel of fact against Noriega. "It's the hottest 'Get out of Jail Free' card around," said Burstyn, who added that the prosecution does not have one witness that can tie Noriega directly to a drug transaction. The prosecution is so desperate for wit-

nesses against Noriega, he stated matter of factly, that "it's a sellers' market."

Blandón, who also reviewed thousands of pages of documents seized in Panama by the U.S. forces during their invasion on Dec. 20, 1989, says that "there is nothing that incriminates Noriega" in those documents.

It thus seems that George Bush slaughtered at least 4,000 Panamanians for nothing. The amount of drugs flowing through Panama to the United States has increased since Noriega was ousted. The "cocaine" found at Noriega's headquarters last year turned out to be cornmeal tamales, the traditional Christmas fare, and now, there is no "smoking gun" in the documents American GIs risked their lives to capture.

By raiding Blandón, the prosecution hasn't done much to increase his credibility. As the Dec. 10 *New York Times* describes him, Blandón is "a shadowy figure capable of hidden alliances and shifting loyalties." He is also a liar, as this news service has known since at least 1988, when Blandón told a U.S. Senate committee that *EIR* and its founding editor, Lyndon LaRouche, "supplied Noriega with reports on U.S. senators."

Undeterred by these blows to their case, prosecutors turned yet another seeming setback into an opportunity for a European junket. On Dec. 14, Judge Hoeveller again told the government to free some of Noriega's personal bank accounts to allow him to pay for his legal costs, otherwise the court might order a hearing into how much of Noriega's money came from U.S. intelligence agencies. Instead of following the judge's suggestion, a delegation from the U.S. Justice and State Departments took off on a tour of Austria, France, Germany, Switzerland, and other countries for meetings—at U.S. taxpayers' expense.