

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### U.S. used chemical weapons

*Atropine was just one of the weapons in the U.S. arsenal tested in Panama to "get Noriega."*

**T**he forces sent by George Bush to invade Panama during Christmas of 1989 used chemical weapons against the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), say survivors. One chemical employed against the PDF, according to the reports, was the drug atropine, the active ingredient of belladonna, or nightshade.

Until the invasion, the usefulness of atropine in chemical warfare was as an antidote to nerve gas. Its reported use as an offensive weapon in Panama was unusual. But then, claiming that everything was justified to "get Gen. Manuel Noriega," the Bush administration tested every weapon in the American arsenal during the invasion, using the Panamanians as guinea pigs.

This included, among other weapons, the Stealth fighter planes, kevlar vests and helmets, laser-guided bombs, and possibly even laser "death" rays and mercury-laden bullets. The last entered the victims' heads but did not exit, turning brains "into mush," said doctors who had examined the bodies, during a program televised Feb. 2 by WETA, a Washington, D.C. public television station.

As for the use of atropine, medical experts say that the symptoms described by the reported victims—extreme heat and dehydration—are what one would expect from exposure to the chemical. "You could say that people exposed to atropine will end up dry as a bone, red as a beet, and mad as a hatter," said one of the medical experts we consulted. He was referring to the extremely dilated pupils of

the victims, which give them the wide-eyed look of an insane person.

The reports that the United States employed chemical weapons against the PDF in Panama have been so persistent and come from so many varied sources, that they cannot be dismissed as anti-American propaganda. At the very least, an investigation by the U.S. Congress is warranted.

The Congress should also raise questions about the harping that the latest invasion target, Saddam Hussein, "uses chemical weapons against his own people," even though a U.S. Army War College report says that there is no proof that Iraq gassed the Kurds. One should ask, is the Bush administration in fact preparing to use chemical weapons against Iraq, rather than the other way around?

It would certainly not be the first time the Bush administration played dirty with its opponents and lied to the American people. After killing at least 4,000, if not more, Panamanians and destroying Panama's economy, allegedly to get one man, it should come as no surprise that the Bush administration has been equally willing to destroy democracy and the right to due process in the U.S. by denying the former Panamanian leader a fair trial. Noriega's railroad will depart without delay on June 24, ruled a federal judge in Miami.

U.S. District Judge William Hoeweler on Jan. 29 rejected a defense motion to dismiss charges against Noriega. The defense argued that the government had grossly violated Noriega's rights by taping privileged

communications between Noriega and his attorneys, and then handing the tapes to the prosecution. Some of the taped conversations were in fact obtained by Cable News Network (CNN), which broadcasted them all over the world, setting off an international scandal.

The prosecution's key witness against Noriega, José Isabel Blandón, said the government provided him with several hours' worth of the tapes. After listening to the Spanish-language conversations, he says, he prepared English-language summaries for the prosecutors and discussed the contents of Noriega's conversations with members of the prosecution team. Besides tainting his testimony by listening to the tapes, Blandón's summaries and discussions allowed prosecutors to anticipate and possibly to sabotage Noriega's defense by persecuting potential defense witnesses.

The government does not deny misconduct, but says it was all due to "procedural errors." The government is now investigating its top witness, Blandón, who could be indicted for giving or selling the tapes to CNN.

But, Hoeweler ruled that the government's violation of attorney-client confidentiality was insufficient cause to dismiss the case, although he added that he might take up the matter again if it seemed that Noriega's rights were violated.

Judge Hoeweler also allowed the Bush administration to get away with the claim that it cannot persuade those countries it strong-armed into the anti-Iraq coalition to release funds from Noriega's personal accounts. Since Noriega can't use his own money to pay his lawyers, Hoeweler fired half of his defense team. Noriega will have to defend himself against a prosecution backed by the unlimited resources of the U.S. government, with court-appointed attorneys paid cut-rate fees.