

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### A bodyguard of lies

*The Bush administration figures the American public is so stupid it will swallow anything.*

To counter the cumulative effects of revelations that the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama killed thousands of innocent Panamanian civilians and installed a drug-linked government in power there, the Bush administration is deploying "a bodyguard of lies" to keep the lid on. But the administration is apparently convinced that it can't go wrong underestimating the intelligence of the American people, because it's not even taking the trouble to make up plausible stories.

For example, in response to a report from the General Accounting Office that drug activity is up in Panama since the ouster of Gen. Manuel Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Bernard Aronson told the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs on July 30: What really happened, "is that a corrupt dictator who actively promoted and participated in drug trafficking and money laundering has been replaced by a government which actively pursues counter-narcotics efforts."

He added that "there was a cocaine lab operating in the offices of the chief of Noriega's immigration service," a whopper so absurd that it took Aronson this long to invent it. In fact, while U.S. law enforcement officials admit there were *no* cocaine labs in Panama before the invasion, now "there are at least eight cocaine production plants in the jungle of Darien province that borders on Colombia," according to U.S. military sources cited by the April 28 *Los Angeles Times*.

In a front-page story on Aug. 13, the *New York Times* reported that

since George Bush ordered Panama invaded, cocaine smugglers are hauling drugs even in plain daylight. "Emboldened traffickers ship more to the U.S. now than under Noriega," the paper reported.

Among other lies Aronson told Congress:

- The U.S.-installed Panamanian government of Guillermo Endara is committed to fighting drugs.

The fact is that most senior officials of the government, including Endara, Attorney General Rogelio Cruz, and Vice President Guillermo "Billy" Ford, are tied to drug money-laundering banks. Endara also set up the accounts used by Manuel Contreras, the head of Chile's secret police, the DINA, to pay the agents involved in the 1976 Washington murder of former Chilean Foreign Minister Orlando Letelier, according to an article by James Henry in the July 28 *Washington Post*. Henry added that, after Noriega shut down a bank owned by Cali cocaine cartel capo Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela in 1986, Attorney General Cruz "personally saw to it that \$7 million of FIB's deposits were returned to [Rodríguez] Orejuela in Colombia."

And, wrote Henry, "a senior official" of Colón's Free Zone is helping the traffickers.

Colón Free Zone's most senior official is Jaime Ford Lara, a nephew of Vice President Ford, who introduced the family to convicted drug money launderer Ramón Milián Rodríguez, his former classmate. Milián says members of the Ford family, includ-

ing Billy, helped him to launder money.

- "There is no basis whatsoever [to the charge] that thousands of civilians died in Operation Just Cause," said Aronson.

Testifying before the same congressional committee on July 30, Pentagon spokesman Gen. James Harding said that the confirmed casualties were 272. The estimates of thousands killed have come from two human rights groups in Panama, one of which is led by Isabel Corro, said General Harding. (Orders to place Mrs. Corro under arrest on trumped-up charges were issued by occupation authorities last month.) These groups allege that many Panamanians are buried in mass graves, said General Harding, and their allegations have been picked up by the mass media. But, he said, there are no common graves and invading U.S. troops "were instructed to use minimum force and then only when absolutely necessary."

Yet, as CBS News's 60 Minutes show reported last Sept. 30, "Reporters found that more than 100 bodies were buried at the Jardín de Paz, the Garden of Peace Cemetery in Panama City." According to 60 Minutes, a report from an Army casualty officer nine days after the invasion noted: "Estimate of 1,000 civilians killed is about right. . . . Some were killed in the El Chorrillo section of Panama City, where about 10 blocks of high-density housing or slums were destroyed as a result of our ops."

And, contrary to General Harding's claim that invading troops were under instructions to use minimum force, U.S. Army combat orders declassified for a court martial last year "put strong emphasis on protecting U.S. lives and eliminating any threats in combat 'with surprise, speed and violence of execution,'" according to published accounts.