

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Asbestos, crack, murder, and tear gas

Over two years after the invasion, the railroad of Noriega nears its end, but life in U.S.-occupied Panama worsens.

The U.S.-installed government of Guillermo "Porky" Endara ordered the police to use tear gas, buckshot, and bullets over March 16-20 to break up demonstrations in El Chorrillo.

El Chorrillo, a poor neighborhood with a largely black population, was virtually wiped out by the U.S. forces that invaded Panama on Dec. 20, 1989 to get Gen. Manuel Noriega. The protests were to ask for reparations for the war victims, who, more than two years after the U.S. action, have not been fully compensated for their losses.

"This has gone beyond the limits," Endara said about the protests. "It's intolerable," he added, according to Mexico's *La Jornada*. "I have ordered the police to restore order, with a minimum of violence. However, things are getting rough," said Endara, a banking partner of the Medellín cocaine cartel.

The "minimum of violence" ordered by Endara was such that March 19 has been dubbed "Black Thursday," said Israel Martínez, a leader of "Barrio Martir" (Martyred Neighborhood), the group that organized the protest. "Little children had to be rushed to the hospital, and hours after everything was over, people could still not go back into their houses because of the lingering teargas vapors," said Martínez in a March 31 telephone interview.

"Mind you, we are not asking to be compensated for the people who were killed during the invasion," he said. More than 500 of the estimated 4,000 Panamanians killed by U.S. invading forces were from El Chorrillo.

"We are not asking to be compensated for the hundreds of loved ones whose remains have not been found nor given a proper Christian burial. Nor are we talking about the thousands of children traumatized by the invasion, who probably have suffered irreversible damage. There is not enough money in the world to compensate for that," he said.

Residents are seeking \$3,500 per family to replace household goods lost in the invasion, an amount that is barely adequate if one considers the cost of even the lowest-priced refrigerator, stove, bed, table, chairs, and such. They are also asking for debt cancellation on war-damaged apartments, and for housing for the families that were left without permanent dwellings by George Bush's military action.

Most of the housing units put up under U.S. sponsorship to replace the bombed-out buildings in El Chorrillo have inadequate ventilation and were built with asbestos, a material considered so toxic by the United States government that it is spending millions of dollars to remove it from schools and other public buildings in the United States, said Martínez.

Besides asbestos, the Bush administration has apparently also given the Panamanians lessons on the rule of democracy in the new world order. For example, Endara ordered the preventive detention of "Barrio Martir" leader Hector Avila. "Avila was kept behind bars on charges of conspiracy and attempting against the means of transportation, which is unheard of," said Martínez.

Before the invasion, during the so-

called "Noriega dictatorship," Avila would have been charged at most with obstructing traffic, a misdemeanor punishable by no more than 10 days in jail or a \$30 fine, Martínez explained. An attempt by Endara's attorney general, Rogelio Cruz, a partner of the Cali cocaine cartel, to treat obstruction of traffic for political reasons as a felony, was rejected by the legislature, he said.

But Endara achieved the same results with the conspiracy charge against Avila, who was released after nine days in jail, on condition that he *not go home again* to El Chorrillo. Avila still faces up to another six years in jail for leading the protest.

So much for democracy in Panama. Although the country is still occupied by U.S. soldiers, they have not prevented an enormous increase in crime. On the contrary, there is an epidemic of teenage prostitution, and domestic drug consumption has exploded. Crack cocaine, virtually unknown before the invasion, is now openly sold and consumed on city streets, school yards, and neighborhood playgrounds.

At least 10 taxi drivers have been murdered by robbers. Armed robberies are daily occurrences. Japanese businessman Takechi Ota was found dead on March 25, some 10 days after his company, Citizen Watch, reportedly paid a \$750,000 ransom to kidnapers. Allegedly, the kidnapers belonged to a so-called "M-20," for December 20 Movement, which the occupation government claims is made up of Noriega loyalists.

But Cancio Tazón, an admitted accomplice in an earlier case of kidnaper-murder against the grandchild of former Panama Defense Forces Col. Marcos Justine, now says his kidnappings were carried out with the connivance of Attorney General Cruz and others in the Endara government.