

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

'Only 13% were women and children'

On the eve of the Republican convention, a congressional committee whitewashes Bush's murder of Panamanians.

The House Armed Services Committee issued a report Aug. 4 claiming that fewer than 100 "innocent civilians" were killed during the Dec. 20, 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama. According to the report released by committee chairman Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wisc.), "only about 13% of the civilian dead are female and children."

The report, issued more than 31 months after the invasion, claims that "a fair estimate" of the total number of Panamanians killed in the invasion is "300-odd." Of those, some 70 were members of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). Most of the remainder, they say, "were either a) looters or b) members of Gen. Manuel Noriega's so-called Dignity Battalions."

Rep. Larry Hopkins (R-Ky.), the ranking member of the Investigations subcommittee that prepared the report, stated: "Our investigation convincingly refutes the various wild allegations that thousands of Panamanians were killed." Hopkins added that there was "absolutely no evidence of secret mass graves, bodies being dumped at sea, or any of the other similar stories that were given much attention and visibility in the American press." Subcommittee chairman Nicholas Mavroules (D-Mass.) said that had there been indiscriminate killings, the number of children and women killed would have been about the same as men.

The report lies and its methodology is faulty, says Isabel Corro, president of the Association of Families of the Fallen of December 20. "It's totally absurd," she said, in a telephone

interview from Panama. "How did they distinguish between the 'innocent' civilians and the looters? Did the bodies have tags on them stating 'I am a looter?' I think Congress is out of line trying to justify a 'Just Cause' that is the most unjust cause ever."

Corro said that an estimated 4,000 people were killed in the invasion and about 1,500 permanently injured. In fact, while the world's press was reporting that U.S. troops were burning bodies in the streets of Panama, throwing them in the sea, or dumping them in mass graves, the U.S. government and the American media engaged in what former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark called "a conspiracy of silence."

Even after Clark called attention to a mass grave in Jardín de Paz cemetery in Panama City a few weeks after the invasion, the U.S. Southern Command in Panama was insisting that only "84 Panamanian" civilians had been killed, while U.S. reporters on the scene couldn't even be bothered to put down their daiquiris long enough to visit the cemetery, a short cab ride away from their hotel.

Corro's group succeeded in raising \$25,000 to pay for the exhumation of the grave at Jardín de Paz. There, she finally found the body of her father, a PDF lieutenant, along with 122 other cadavers, some of them "bound hand and foot," indicating that they were killed in cold blood after being tortured. Panama's forensic authorities witnessed the exhumations, "but we had to pay all their expenses, even their lunches."

CBS's "60 Minutes" filmed the exhumation, finally bringing the issue before the U.S. public. Another mass grave was excavated in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Colón, where about 50 bodies were found. Again, neither the U.S. government nor the U.S.-installed government of Panama paid for these exhumations. There are a reported 10 additional mass graves, but the funds have run out. "We still owe about \$4,640 and all the bills are in my name," said Corro.

The committee admits that its absurdly low figure of "300-odd" total Panamanians killed is based on information from the so-called Panamanian Committee for Human Rights (PCHR), and from the Panamanian government Institute of Legal Medicine. The PCHR was part of the U.S.-funded "get Noriega" apparatus of drug cartel partners that Bush has installed as the government of Panama. Its former leader, Osvaldo Velásquez, was rewarded with a diplomatic post in Switzerland by the puppet government of Guillermo Endara. Roberto Troncoso, who succeeded Velásquez, protested because Endara bowed to international pressure and freed from jail a journalist who was a political prisoner, for humanitarian reasons.

The government's Institute of Legal Medicine, according to the congressional report, refused to issue death certificates to at least a half-dozen families. "You can't identify ashes," said the institute's director. "So none of these alleged casualties are included in his tabulations," admits the congressional report.

Corro now says, "I believe in divine justice. I believe it was the breath of those souls killed on Dec. 20 that blew the tear gas towards Bush when he attempted to speak here on June 11, in an act of disrespect for our dead. And the most powerful leader in the world, cried, ran and could not talk."