

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

'The Panama Deception'

As the award-winning film sparks calls for a probe of Bush's invasion, the puppet regime puts nation's defenders on trial.

Barbara Trent, director of "The Panama Deception," winner of this year's Academy Award for best documentary film, said that it is sparking calls to investigate the 1989 invasion ordered by former President George Bush. "There was no need to send 26,000 U.S. soldiers to Panama just to capture Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega," Trent said at a news conference in Panama City, the May 6 *La Estrella de Panamá* reported. "The true aim of the American government was to destroy the Panamanian Defense Forces" (PDF).

As soon as the fighting ended, the U.S.-installed President, drug banker Guillermo Endara, ordered the dissolution of the PDF, and the media launched a campaign to brainwash Panamanians into believing that they should amend their Constitution to forever bar their own Army and, instead, depend on the U.S. military occupation army. But, in a plebiscite last Dec. 16, over two-thirds of those who voted rejected the military emasculation of Panama.

Undeterred, the regime has now put former President Manuel Solís Palma, Benjamín Colamarco, Enrique Thompson, and Arturo Marquín on trial on charges of "conspiring against the international personality of the state," for their role in the creation of the Dignity Battalions and the Committees for the Defense of the Fatherland and National Dignity (Codepadi).

Solís Palma, who is in exile in Venezuela, is being tried *in absentia*. He said that while he didn't order the establishment of the Battalions or the

Codepadi, he was honored by their creation. "I was totally in agreement that during my administration those instruments for the defense of the nation were created, because I believe that it is the duty of all Panamanians to defend their nation, just as it is the duty of the patriots of any country to defend their nation anytime it is threatened by an invasion by a foreign power."

Colamarco, who commanded the Dignity Battalions and who has been imprisoned since the 1989 invasion, said just before the trial started on May 19 that he was proud of the role played by the civilian militias. "No Panamanian can ever accept that the U.S. has even the most minimal right to interfere in our internal affairs, and much less can justify, regardless of the pretext, the criminal military invasion by the American Army and the massacre" of thousands of people.

An estimated 4,000 Panamanians were killed during the invasion, and more than a score of Americans lost their lives. The invading forces used Panama as a testing ground for a number of sophisticated weapons, including the "Stealth" plane, which was used to bomb a PDF that lacked even the most primitive air defense capability.

"The Panama Deception" may lead to a U.S. congressional investigation on the number killed in the invasion, according to Trent. A report released last year by the House Armed Services Committee claimed that no more than "500-odd" Panamanians were killed. The film tends to support the higher estimates of independent observers, with footage on the exhu-

mation of bodies from at least one mass grave. Regardless, the Pentagon admits that 75% of those killed were civilians. And there are now more drugs and drug money-laundering than ever in Panama, says the U.S. Government Accounting Office.

As Trent said, according to *La Estrella*, "True democracy can never be installed using foreign troops."

For a while, the Endara regime banned the documentary, claiming it "denigrated the image" of Panama. Similarly, the U.S. correspondent of the daily *La Prensa*, touted as a paragon of free speech by the U.S. media, circulated petitions against it. But these efforts ended once the movie won the Oscar. The documentary has become a box-office success in the United States, but it has been shunned by PBS, the U.S. public television network, and by the major commercial networks.

In her speech accepting the Oscar last March, and in her recent visit to Panama, Trent reiterated her harsh criticism of the U.S. media for their complicity with the Bush administration in deceiving the public into supporting the invasion. Panama's Journalist Union gave her an award for her attempt to bring out the truth.

"The Panama Deception" does have its flaws. It makes the absurd claim that Noriega fell because his "protectors," John Poindexter, Oliver North, and William Casey, were weakened by the Iran-Contra scandal, when in fact it was Poindexter who launched the attack against Noriega by feeding dirt to *New York Times* "investigative reporter" Seymour Hersh. Still, it is a good visual account of the invasion, and one of the few sources to note that it wasn't until Noriega moved against their drug money-laundering with "Operation Pisces," that the U.S. got his opponents in Panama to actively push for his overthrow.