

What's really going on inside Panama

by Robyn Quijano

On the evening of March 3, the U.S. population was treated to a flash of truth on what's really going on in Panama. But only a flash. ABC's Ted Koppel interviewed Panamanian opposition leader Ricardo Arias Calderón. Arias refused to support deposed President Eric Delvalle, granting only that he supports Delvalle's move to oust Gen. Manuel Noriega, the head of the Panamanian Defense Forces.

The rest of the "Nightline" news program was an amusing sequence of interviews with Delvalle's diplomats, recognized by the State Department, and diplomats of the actual Panamanian government that have been named *persona non grata* by the U.S. administration. The shocker of the show for the U.S. public, was that Eric Delvalle, into whose accounts the United States is funneling millions of dollars of canal revenues, is supported by no one but the U.S. State Department (article, page 62).

Eric Arturo Delvalle was removed by Panama's elected National Assembly for violating Article 179 of the Panamanian Constitution, the same constitution and the same National Assembly that voted Delvalle himself into the office of the presidency. Delvalle was called a puppet, by the Reagan administration, for almost three years, while he was President. Now, after he buckled to pressure of the State Department's Elliott Abrams, famous for lying to Congress on the Contra affair, Delvalle is being proclaimed the legitimate President by the U.S. government.

After months of featuring small rallies of General Noriega's opposition taking the streets as major mass demonstrations, the U.S. media have been unable to cover up the fact that no opposition to the newly elected government of Manuel Solís Palma has appeared in the streets. Instead, a "nationalist united front" has been formed, of trade unions, peasant and popular organizations, as well as the parties that back the new President, and they have put tens of thousands in the streets to back General Noriega and the new government.

In fact, on the ground in Panama, there is jubilation, because there is a sense of national mobilization, with a President who actively asserts nationalist economic policies.

Former President Nicolás Ardito Barletta and former President Delvalle were both outsiders to the nationalist movement built by Gen. Omar Torrijos, and both alienated the nationalist popular organizations by imposing International Monetary Fund-designed austerity packages. Now, with nationalist Solís Palma at the helm, the spirit of rebuilding the nation, and fighting for sovereignty, has taken over.

On Feb. 29, President Solís Palma addressed the National Assembly for the first time. Thousands gathered outside the Legislative Palace to support the new President. Even the Republican party, the small party to which Eric Delvalle belongs, officially joined the government coalition in support of Solís Palma. Solís told Panamanians that he will lead a fight for the survival of the nation. He noted that he had become Minister of the Presidency through Article 184 of the Constitution, at "a difficult moment in which our country is suffering one of the greatest aggressions in its history by the U.S. government." He addressed the Ibero-American ambassadors: "Know . . . that the Panamanian people will never be able to forget those who stood by them when their fate reached the crossroads of definitions." The following day, despite enormous U.S. pressure, Brazil recognized the new President.

Responding to the U.S. threat to enforce a total trade embargo, and force its allies to do the same, Solís said: "We will have recourse to any means, to any country without reserve, to find the resources and support for our country." We will not let ourselves be isolated, he said, reaffirming his commitment to the Non-Aligned Movement and to the Contadora group.

He also laid out a development perspective including development projects, and laid plan for the revival of the local councils through which the Torrijos government had created popular participatory democracy.

Alemán Boyd, the president of the Legislative Assembly, also spoke at the inaugural session. He described the U.S. government's relentless attack on Noriega as an attack, not on one man, or even on a country, but "our project of liberation" from colonialism.

In fact, it has become so clear in Panama that the U.S. aggression is aimed at ripping up the Canal treaties that would return the Canal Zone to Panama by the year 2000, that even opposition leader Arias Calderón felt compelled to state first in the Koppel interview, that the opposition would not allow the renegotiating of the treaties, and would never hand over the canal to the United States. The more ferocious the U.S. assault, the more talk of invasion and renegotiating the treaties, the more isolated the Panamanian opposition, run by bankers, businessmen, and yuppies, becomes. As one man in the street said, "I am not fighting for General Noriega. I am behind the new government, because I am fighting for the canal, and my country's sovereignty."

Boyd also developed the government's new economic program for the Assembly. "If the terms and conditions the

IMF and the World Bank have demanded are accepted, the government would be committing political suicide." He recommended that the national government "should have real planning, since this, in reality, hasn't existed for a long time. A different criterion is needed with respect to the international credit organizations, since the debt can't be paid, without putting in danger the very basis of our national existence," he said.

Strike? It was a lock-out!

On March 3, the opposition called off the strike they had begun on Feb. 29, declaring it a "complete success." In reality, the strike was a lock-out by industrialists and major store chains. But as even the U.S. media had to admit, life in the non-elite areas went on as usual, with almost all stores open. The opposition Civic Crusade stated that they wanted to avoid the financial collapse of Panama, since it will "move the Panamanian people to violence." The U.S. government and the Senate, however, seem to want exactly that. Crusade member Aurelio Barria stated at a news conference that while the Crusade approved of U.S. financial pressure on the government, they did not want the private sector of Panama to suffer the consequences of being denied funds.

On the morning before the owners called off their lock out, CONATO, the confederation of Panamanian trade unions, the public employees union, and the peasant federations jointly demanded that the government take whatever measures necessary to reopen factories and businesses. They rejected the "so-called strike," as a prelude to an invasion by the United States. The communiqué stated that such an invasion would cost the lives of thousands of Panamanians, and it charged that the employers' strike was being funded by the United States, which is trying to impose a docile government "willing to renegotiate the canal treaties, and extend the American presence in the Canal Zone.

"This political strike by the employers is affecting the wages of the workers . . . encircling with hunger the popular sectors." They demanded that the government take over and reopen companies illegally closed, and called for all the workers of the closed businesses to assemble in front of the CONATO headquarters to begin to take measures to reopen businesses. The strike was later called off.

Whatever lies might come out of the U.S. State Department, it is obvious that the new government of President Solís Palma has massive popular support. On March 4, General Noriega addressed a rally of 15,000 supporters in the city of Colón. From there he will tour the interior of the country, where the local bases of the Torrijista movement have continuously supported the general, and his nationalist project. While the United States has the power to invade and to starve out the tiny Panamanian republic, the population will not easily reimbrace colonial status. Washington would do well to stop believing its own propaganda, and take a hard look at what's really going on inside Panama.

'Vesco International' lashes out at Noriega

In a joint statement published on Feb. 27, three Ibero-American ex-Presidents joined the State Department's campaign for Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega to resign: Colombia's Alfonso López Michelsen, Venezuela's Carlos Andrés Pérez, and Costa Rica's Daniel Oduber.

The three announced that they had presented U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, with a proposed strategy to achieve "Panama's reentry into the community of democratic nations." This requires, they stated, not only that Noriega resign, but that Panama be placed under "the supervision of the United States, Venezuela, Colombia, and Costa Rica."

The activation of these three gentlemen in the campaign against Panama confirms *EIR's* report that it is Robert Vesco's drug mob which now seeks to take power in Panama (see Vol. 15, No. 10).

Consider the following:

Alfonso López Michelsen is a "long-term business associate" of Gabriel Lewis Galindo, the opposition chief just appointed "roving ambassador" by ex-President of Panama Eric Delvalle, according to Lewis Galindo's old friend, William Jordan. What kind of business? Under López Michelsen's Colombian presidency (1974-77), the financial mechanisms for drug money-laundering—no questions asked—were set up, with the creation of the well-named "sinister window" at the Banco de la República.

In 1982, the mafia repaid the favor—by supporting López Michelsen's next presidential campaign with a 25 million peso check from Hitler-devotee Carlos Lehder.

In May 1984, barely one week after the Colombian mafia assassinated Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, López Michelsen met with Medellín Cartel chiefs Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Jorge Luis Ochoa in Panama. The mob proposed that López Michelsen mediate between them and the Colombian government, to arrange a truce: The government grants them an amnesty, they stop their war inside Colombia, and bring back their billions to help pay the debt. López Michelsen accepted the proposal. When President Belisario Betancur refused, he took the mafia's proposal to the public. In a lengthy interview published by the Colombian daily *El Tiempo* on July 29, 1984, López Michelsen reported that he had met with the drug traffickers, outlined their proposal, and argued that Colombia should accept!