

## The rising global costs of the U.S. war on Panama

by Gretchen Small

The Reagan administration's showdown with Panama is fast reaching a decisive point, whose outcome no sober analyst should care to predict. While the U.S. establishment has committed the international prestige of the United States to securing the ouster of the Commander of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega, by a deadline of the first week in April, Panama's nationalist elite has begun organizing a continental mobilization in defense of its sovereignty.

Washington appears oblivious to any risks involved. Vice President George Bush suggested the U.S. should kidnap General Noriega, in a March 7 interview with Cable News Network. The "long arm of U.S. justice" has proven itself by capturing terrorists as in the case of Hamadei and Younis. "Don't be surprised. . . . I'm suggesting the system has a way of working to bring people to justice, and I hope it will in this case," Bush stated.

"The United States cannot permit Noriega to remain in power, if it wishes to continue being respected by other Central American nations," Henry Kissinger has been stating in recent U.S. conferences, Mexico's *Excelsior* daily reported March 1. "Central American nations respect force. . . . If we overthrow someone in political power, we have obligation to stick to it, and assure that the successor be someone with whom we are in agreement."

Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams assured the U.S. Congress on March 10 that Noriega's ouster is now a matter of days, because the United States has cut off the flow of dollars to Panama. The House of Representatives gave him full backing, passing a resolution the next day urging the administration to consider "further economic and political sanctions."

All international diplomatic norms have been cast aside, in the campaign to shut down Panama's economy. When Panama's New York vice consul general, Donna Stuart, attempted to transfer government funds back to Panama on

March 10, the State Department ordered New York state police to take over the consul's office—legally Panamanian territory—and forcibly expel the vice consul.

From the beginning, Washington officials have been quite smug, telling themselves and the U.S. public that the nation of Panama has no option but to accept U.S. dictates. Thus far, however, there has been neither any sign that the general is interested in quitting, nor that support inside Panama for the U.S. drive has expanded beyond pot-banging by the well-heeled, but small, opposition movement.

So, the U.S. media has begun a propaganda barrage to prepare for a military invasion, if that's what it takes. An editorial opinion column in the *Washington Times* March 10 stated bluntly that the United States should not only be prepared to invade Panama, but also that the Reagan administration should declare outright that it no longer respects the principle of sovereignty in the developing sector.

The State Department's Panamanian assets have taken the call. On March 10, the *Washington Times* reported that Mariela Delvalle, the wife of the ex-President, had told two U.S. congressmen that the United States "should start thinking about" military intervention. "We want you to be ready," she told them. The proposal, published because it is helpful to U.S. preparations, blew up in the face of the opposition movement when it was reported in Panama. Carlos Arellano Lennox, a leading member of the opposition Christian Democratic Party, became the first to break with the "alternative government" coalition set up under U.S. pressure, because he opposes a U.S. invasion.

### Which government is being isolated?

What are the costs of sending in the Marines to install a government run from Foggy Bottom? The question is not so easily answered as some Washington machos might believe. The possibility that a surgical strike could succeed appears

dubious. Is the United States prepared to occupy Panama? If it does, would the American public support an escalating war in Central and South America which may result?

It were advisable, indeed, that those policymakers in Washington drawing up the options, base their decisions upon the realities of the on-the-ground situation in Panama and Ibero-America, and not upon the reports of opposition figures, or such would-be toughs as the mendacious Assistant Secretary Elliott Abrams. Abrams lied once again to Congress on March 10, when he told the House Panama Canal Subcommittee that the "Latin democracies," Japan, and Europe, have recognized the State Department's phantom "government in hiding" of Eric Delvalle. The U.S. media likewise has repeatedly reported that the Noriega-allied Manuel Solis Palma government in Panama is fast becoming an international outlaw regime, recognized only by Communist regimes.

Neither is true. The tide is turning instead against the "government-in-hiding," recognized formally thus far only by the United States and Bolivia, possibly to be joined shortly by Costa Rica.

Take the case of Japan. On March 5, a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official reported that Japan had decided to recognize the Solis Palma government, because "he took power legally under the Constitution, and appears to be in control of the country." Abrams claims that Japan backed down, after he called in the chargé d'affaires in Washington for a dressing down, but a senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official viewed the matter differently.

"The U.S. State Department is seeking Japan's understanding on this sensitive matter," the official told the press on March 6. "Abrams explained the U.S. stance, and, at the same time, the Japanese side explained its position. They agreed to engage in further consultations." They have announced no policy since.

The State Department had been quite pleased with the initial reaction of Peru's President Alan García, a friend of General Noriega who commands great respect as a moral leader in Ibero-America. García sharply criticized the deposition of Delvalle on Feb. 28, and recalled Peru's ambassador. But García's support for the State Department did not last long. Within a week, García sent a delegation of APRA congressmen to Panama to evaluate the situation, and established regular telephone communication with President Solis Palma. The APRA delegation concluded that a "continental defense" of Panama's sovereignty is required, and they will help lead it. (See Documentation).

In fact, of the "Latin democracies," Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Guatemala, and Argentina have recognized the Solis Palma government—not President-by-video Delvalle.

The recognition by the government of Raúl Alfonsín in Argentina is most telling of the dynamic which the U.S. war on Panama has set in motion in Ibero-America.

A favorite of the Project Democracy crowd in Washington, Alfonsín was in on the attempt to oust Noriega from the

outset. Delvalle spoke with Alfonsín by telephone, shortly before he attempted to fire Noriega on Feb. 25, on orders of Abrams. As soon as Delvalle was ousted for taking orders from a foreign government, Alfonsín ordered Argentina's ambassador withdrawn, and the Foreign Ministry issued statements about defending democracy in the region from the awful military.

Lining up with the State Department's war, however, proved to be an unsustainable policy, domestically. Panama's fight for full sovereignty over the Panama Canal has long been equated with Argentina's battle for the Malvinas Islands, seized by Great Britain in the 1830s. When it became clear that the anti-Noriega war is a thinly veiled attempt to grab the Panama Canal, "Panama, Malvinas Defense Committees" began springing up in Argentina.

With sentiments already running high over British military maneuvers around the Malvinas, Alfonsín faced a domestic explosion he could not handle.

### A strategy of unity

Noriega and President Solis Palma have been out organizing to swing their Ibero-American allies around, giving interviews on radio and to the printed press of every country. Their message in each is summarized in Noriega's statement to Colombia's Radio Caracol on March 7. With its actions against Panama, he said, "the United States is telling the rest of Latin America, the sister nations of Contadora and the Group of Eight, that if the U.S. says something and a nation does not agree with it, then that nation will get the Panama menu—and the Panama menu is economic aggression, journalistic disinformation, slander, threats, and discredit."

Ibero-America's press has been exposing the fraud of the paper-thin opposition, run from top to bottom by the United States. On March 8, Mexico's *El Dia* reveals the existence of a document from October 1987, "Thoughts on the Panamanian Political Situation," written by U.S. embassy personnel, which outlines, step by step, the plan to overthrow Noriega. Mexico's *Excelsior* correspondents detail how the same U.S. diplomatic personnel who ran the Philippines coup against Marcos, are running the Panama operation.

Venezuela's magazine *Elite* introduced an interview with Noriega in its March 8 issue with the warning: "The man who represents today Latin American dignity . . . more than a general, he seems to be an idea in action, and the gringos, I think, have forgotten this: It is not easy to fight nor kill an idea."

When Panama's Foreign Ministry warned on March 8 that a U.S. military intervention may be imminent—reporting that warships are off both coasts of Panama, at the same time that unauthorized U.S. National Guard exercises named, ominously, "Total Warrior," begun on Panamanian territory—Mexico responded at once. Military intervention by the U.S. in Panama would affect Mexican interests "of the greatest importance, including those of national security," a Mexican Foreign Ministry official warned.

## Panama's fight is an Ibero-American fight

U.S. media bombardment of the American people with lies about developments in Panama has blinded them to a strategic reality: namely, that the Ibero-American continent, with the Malvinas conflict still fresh in its memory, has grown sharply aware that it is the issue of sovereignty which is at stake in the Panama crisis. The more rapidly the United States escalates against Panama, the more rapidly will the continent unify in its own defense—and against its former ally to the north.

We publish here a sample of Ibero-American responses to the U.S. policy.

### **Solis Palma interviewed in Mexico**

*On March 6, the Mexican daily Excelsior interviewed Panamanian President Manuel Solis Palma (excerpts):*

I have the highest regard for General Noriega, and what they are doing in the United States does not really correspond to a criminal problem or incorrect behavior on the part of General Noriega. It rather corresponds to a political situation, political interests, and naturally General Noriega is the most renowned figure in Panama's nationalist process at this time. To remove him from the scene would also totally diminish the nationalist position of the Defense Forces, and thus of the . . . government. . . .

President Delvalle's decision [to try to oust Noriega] is an approach that is not aimed at solving the nation's problems. Since our country has been fundamentally linked in its solutions to cooperation and help from the United States, by creating a confrontation between General Noriega and American forces, particularly with a sector of the State Department, the economic situation began to suffer many difficulties, while the Americans impose, as a condition for giving further aid, General Noriega's departure. In the first stage, the President [Delvalle] undoubtedly supported General Noriega, but to the extent that the financial problem of the country worsened and the Delvalle government's resistance did not yield the expected results, and we continued enmired in a financial crisis, he believed that the country's only alternative was to deliver Commander Noriega's head and thus provide a way out of the national problem.

The problem with this approach, lies in that while we both agree that a solution for the nation should be sought, it

cannot be sought at any price, taking down our flags, handing over our conquests. And there lie the basic and fundamental differences, which are not of a personal nature, but of a conceptual nature. . . .

Until now, I had believed that military action by the United States in this crisis was impossible. I did not believe that the stupidity would reach such an extreme; but as the measures being taken are unprecedented in history . . . given this level of aggression, I believe that one can no longer eliminate anything, because it would appear to be a matter of blocking the sovereignty of the Panamanian people, which is established in those Treaties. If this is the situation, then military intervention is not to be discounted. . . .

I believe it would be a pyrrhic victory. . . . I have never been a puppet, but it would be preferable to be a puppet of our own people, than to be the puppet of a foreign nation, betraying the fatherland, betraying everything that is the nationalist fight and sentiment of the Panamanian people.

### **General Noriega's story**

*The following are excerpts from a March 4 interview by the Mexican daily Excelsior, with Panamanian Defense Forces chief Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega:*

"Panama is . . . [suffering] an aggression joined by Panamanians whose brain is the Panamanian oligarchy, whose brain is the United States, the U.S. 'establishment.' And aggression by that nation, the most powerful on Earth, against a nation with only two million inhabitants. Of course, there is a reason for this: Panama has a canal, a geographic 'waist,' from which Washington could usurp not only Mexican territory, but also Panamanian territory."

Noriega added that "when the republic was founded . . . a foreigner, Bunau Varilla, signed a treaty . . . never confirmed by any Panamanian. Since then, U.S. aggression has persisted. It imposed governments, established the [nation's] institutions, disarmed the Armed Forces. It intervened on Panamanian territory about 23 times; students have died. So, we have a history of aggression. As time has gone by, aggression changed from bayonets, bullets, and cannons, to slanders, with newspapers, with wire services . . . but it is still aggression. . . .

"Like oil, which, for some countries, can be either a

blessing or a curse, for Panama, the canal is like the prettiest girl on the bloc, who is always the object of seduction and rape by those who have money.”

If the Torrijos-Carter treaties are complied with, the canal could be transformed from an object of lust into a great good for all Latin America, the world, and especially for Panama. Noriega added that when Panama, whose shield bears the words “for the benefit of the world,” permitted its territory to be split to unite the two oceans so ships from all countries could cross, “it was doing a good deed for all humanity. . . .

“Under international law, the United States and Panama are both obliged to carry out the [canal] treaties. They are documents signed with the guarantee of foreign friends, who guarantee Panama that on 12 noon in the year 1999, no foreign soldier will remain on our soil. Panama has the duty to preserve the security and the letter and the spirit of the treaties, in peaceful coexistence with the Americans, until the year 1999. . . . We aren’t going to violate them. We aren’t dumb enough to violate them, knowing we’ve got only 10 years to go for the canal to be ours; we aren’t going to step on that banana peel. Therefore, there isn’t going to be any violation from our side. The Panamanian people are too peaceful and defenseless to confront a nation whose interests are not in conflict with Panamanian interests.”

**Q:** “. . . The possibility of an invasion is being discussed. Do you think this is possible?”

**Noriega:** “We believe that we live in a civilized world. . . . In the Christian spirit, the arrogance of the large cannot impose itself on the weakness of the small; that would be absurd, catastrophic to its morality; and they would find us Panamanians with our dignity armed, not on our knees.”

**Q:** “Could Panama be subjected to . . . what happened to . . . Grenada? Would there be the same kind of combat here?”

**Noriega:** “. . . In Panama, something very different and very special has emerged. We decided that democracy cannot be imposed like a decal that you put on a shirt, run the iron over it and the figure sticks. That is what they want to do, and the U. S.’s error is to want to impose its ‘made in U. S.A.’ democracy on the Latin American countries.

“[Gen. Omar] Torrijos and his companions-in-arms produced a new force, the Defense Forces, in which soldiers don’t compete with civilians, but are colleagues to the civil government administrators. The officer does not sit idle in the barracks, nor spend his time analyzing the Napoleonic war, nor why Hitler lost at Stalingrad. He analyzes a war, today’s war against hunger, misery, and illiteracy. Our defense force is prepared to wage community and social struggles.”

**Q:** “Overseas, you are called Panama’s ‘strong man.’ Do you consider yourself the strong man?”

**Noriega:** “Here in Panama, the only strong people are the women. Here the women rule. Here there is a matriarchy. We are afraid of the women. We respect them. But aside

from this, the concept of a strong man was used to describe the military governments the United States historically imposed when it had a system of imposing military dictatorships on Latin America.

“And now, to cleanse itself in a basin of holy water, it begins to criticize everything military and to try to elevate so-called democracy to the image and likeness of its own system, with its vices, with its drugs, with its treasons, with its men, with its ‘Irangates,’ with its psychological warfare. That is ‘democracy.’ Thus, the term ‘strong man’ is a thing of the past. . . . Strong man is military morality, the morality of friendship, the morality of nationalist, patriotic conscience, the concept of not falling on one’s knees, nor bending one’s backbone.

“We can accept the idea that the Defense Forces—not Noriega—are the strong men, because they won’t crawl; the Panamanian people are the strong men, because their spines are not hinged. In *that* way, we accept the term. . . .”

**Q:** “General, you are being tried in the United States. Even if you could be acquitted, would you want that?”

**Noriega:** “Panamanian dignity affirms that the U.S. courts, especially in this case, made this indictment as part of an aggression against the man they felt was an obstacle. . . . After 18 years of collaboration [with the U.S.] in a battle [against drugs] which has brought medals, letters, resolutions, applause, photographs, certificates . . . they come with this stupidity . . . and throw it against a patriot, against a leader, against an armed forces to subjugate them. And today they are finding out they don’t have a leg to stand on. There is no reason for me to go anywhere outside my country to respond. I am waiting here for Elliott Abrams, to arrest him. . . .

“I believe that Panama is one of the leading nations of Contadora. Panama has made a moral, material and ideological investment, and is paying the price for being in that peace-making organization. When [U.S. National Security Adviser John] Poindexter came here, what he demanded was: Get out of Contadora; tone down your statements. You and Mexico are setting a bad example and you are preventing us from invading Nicaragua.”

### **PRD: a question of sovereignty**

*On March 4, the Mexican daily El Día published in full a communiqué issued by Panama’s Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD). Excerpts follow:*

. . . The existence in Panama of an alleged conflict between military and civilians of a purely local nature has been declared, when what is developing here is a new episode in our nation’s fight for its sovereignty, which is clearly tied to the global policy of the aggressor party, the United States, towards the whole of Latin America. . . .

The behavior of each and every Panamanian, be they worker, priest, businessman or army man, is defined by this choice between colonialism and liberation. Every Latin

American must define him or herself in terms of the aggression of which our country is today an object.

The definition which the Panamanian crisis demands of honest Latin Americans . . . becomes clearer, when it is proven by events that Panama has been turned into a laboratory for the development of new and complex means of intervention and destabilization against Latin American governments, which have already begun to be applied against other countries of the region. It is the case with the campaign carried out by the National Action Party (PAN) of Mexico, in which can be seen in their proposals, methods, and plans, the previously orchestrated campaign against Panama by the [U.S.] embassy, through the self-proclaimed Civic Crusade. The operation launched in Peru through the so-called 'Democratic Front,' is the same thing.

Each and every one is sustained by the active conspiracy of the transnational banks, the organizations of the Black International, the most reactionary sectors of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the oligarchic groups of old and new stripe, which act as internal agents of aggression that originates abroad.

Historic circumstances foreign and hostile to the interests of the Panamanian people, have led us, once again, to occupy a vanguard position in Latin America's fight for the right of our republics to a democratic life based upon effective national self-determination, and upon attention to the demands of social justice. . . . We Panamanians will know how to fulfill our responsibilities to ourselves, and to our Latin American brothers. . . .

### **From Colombia: U.S. target is the canal**

*Former Colombian foreign minister and president of Colombia's Permanent Forum for the Defense of Human Rights, Alfredo Vásquez Carrizosa, in a March 4 column in Colombia's El Espectador. Excerpts follow:*

The United States is seeking to destabilize Noriega, to install there a controllable man, available to the influence of the U.S. ambassador in the Panamanian capital. The key to the current problem in Panama lies there. All the rest, including the charges of Noriega's complicity with the Medellín drug cartel, are fluff. . . .

The Carter-Torrijos treaty of 1977 was the greatest political triumph of the Panamanian general [Torrijos], which won the true independence of his country. The joint exploitation between Panama and the United States of the most important maritime artery of the Western Hemisphere was foreseen through the year 2000, when the Canal will be handed over to Panama, and U.S. forces barracked in the U.S. Canal Zone itself, endowed with powerful logistical means for the military control of the Latin American region, from Mexico through Argentina, will be withdrawn.

With Ronald Reagan's arrival, in 1981, the U.S. has wanted to alter, to the extent possible, what it considers to be the greatest folly of Jimmy Carter: having relinquished the

Canal Zone from the power of the great nation of the North. General Noriega inherited that situation. . . .

### **U.S. 'missionary diplomacy'**

*A March 4, 1988 article by regular columnist María Teresa Herrán, in the Colombian daily El Espectador:*

The evolution of events in Panama shows, once again, the immaturity of American foreign policy towards Latin America. . . . [The United States] does not grasp the hidden and varied mechanisms of our idiosyncrasy. . . . The United States . . . without seeing farther than its nose, applied that "missionary diplomacy" which told Wilson in 1913, that Huerta had to be overthrown, "to teach the South American republics to elect good men." Seventy some years later, the strategy fails again, because the people are not so simple as they would believe.

### **From Peru: We stand behind Panama**

*At a press conference in Panama City on March 5, Sen. Carlos Enrique Melgar of the ruling APRA party, summarized the conclusions reached by a delegation of four APRA congressmen sent by President García:*

Continental defense is inevitable. . . . We need but be called upon—and I am speaking first from the standpoint of the Peruvian APRA party—to defend the sovereignty of a free nation like Panama. . . . This is nothing new: the Latin American doctrine, the ideology of many movements of Latin America. You will recall the phenomena of the Malvinas. We all stood behind Argentina, and similarly, we will all stand behind Panama.

This raises a question to ponder: To what extent should we settle accounts among ourselves, so that the continental mobilization can be more efficient? So that our friends of the north know that Latin America, far from having become the United States' best friend to strengthen it, can become a never-ending bonfire, whose flames could even embrace the nuclear arsenals of two powers that seek to dominate the people of the Third World by blackmail and fear. Therefore, this matter is not just a question for Latin America, but for the Third World. . . .

### **The oligarchy vs. Noriega**

*The following are excerpts from an editorial published by the Lima daily El Nacional on March 8:*

Despite the resistance of small groups linked to the old Panamanian oligarchy, and the notorious interference and pressures of the U.S. government to halt the economy of this country, . . . the government presided over by Manuel Solís Palma is being further consolidated with each new day. . . . General Manuel Antonio Noriega . . . with a "Velasco-styled" political viewpoint, has been promoting a series of civic actions which have enabled the military to obtain the support of the organized population, of the marginalized sectors of the countryside and cities. . . .