

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. intensifies military provocations

The CIA is preparing to use Nicaraguan Contras to stage an invasion of Panama from Costa Rica.

Confirming charges first reported on March 3 in this column, the *Times* of London revealed on July 22 that "more than a thousand former Nicaraguan Contras are being armed, trained and infiltrated into Panama to await orders to begin military actions to drive Gen. Manuel Noriega from power, according to sources directly involved."

The U.S. Southern Command has been ordered to stage daily provocations in the hopes of drawing General Noriega's Panama Defense Forces (PDF) into a military conflict. On July 27, the commander of the Army component of SouthCom, Gen. Marc Cisneros, sent armored personnel carriers, tanks, and trucks across the Bridge of the Americas, which crosses the Panama Canal. Days earlier, his troops staged so-called "evacuation" maneuvers at Gorgas Hospital, under Panamanian jurisdiction, and a contingent of U.S. Marines staged a similar exercise at a U.S. Department of Defense elementary school in the Panamanian township of Gamboa.

The provocations intensified after Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney fired Gen. Fred Woerner as chief of SouthCom on July 20, reportedly because he was too cautious in his dealings with the PDF and Noriega. Woerner's replacement will be Gen. Maxwell Reid Thurman, who is believed more likely to go along with Cisneros's antics.

The U.S. administration has also increased its violations of the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties. Visas were denied to two Panamanians, including Panama's nominee for canal administrator, to attend the Canal Commis-

sion's board of directors meeting in Tacoma, Washington in late July. By unilaterally shifting the meetings to the United States and selectively denying visas to the Panamanian side, the U.S. has cut off Panama from any say in setting policy for what is supposed to be a bi-national canal commission.

The provocations indicate the administration's desperation following its repeated failures in implementing its insane policies against Panama's sovereignty. The administration now seems determined to have U.S. soldiers sent home in body bags.

The U.S. has never been able to mount a credible, indigenous political opposition movement against Noriega, as was done against Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. Its economic sanctions against Panama failed, according to a study issued July 27 by the General Accounting Office. So did its diplomatic efforts to enlist the nations of Ibero-America in a "multilateral" intervention against Panama, through the Organization of American States.

On July 20, culminating a process initiated a month before at the Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama—when 150 legislators determined that the Organization of American States had erred when it sided with the U.S. against Panama at its May 17 meeting—the foreign ministers of Ibero-America reversed themselves, and told the U.S. that they will not help to oust Noriega, nor to install the CIA-financed Democratic Opposition Civic Alliance (ADO-C). The Panamanians, the OAS ministers decreed, should settle their own af-

fairs without any foreign interference.

This has left the ADO-C, which had loudly demanded that the OAS intervene when it thought that it would follow U.S. orders, staging street demonstrations and accusing the OAS of "interfering" in Panama's internal affairs. On July 27 the ADO-C said it might not even participate in a three-way dialogue with the Panama government and the PDF, mediated by the OAS, unless certain preconditions are met—even though it was the ADO-C that had demanded that such a dialogue be held without any preconditions.

Many of the setbacks suffered by the U.S. have been brought about by the administration's own stupidity and arrogance. Colombia's Foreign Minister Julio Londoño said July 26 that he had lodged a protest with the State Department because U.S. Customs officials had searched his suitcase for drugs, despite the fact that he has diplomatic immunity. The search, the second in two months, was carried out while Londoño was on his way to preside over the OAS meeting on Panama, and it was done using a four-pointed prong that destroyed his suitcase, several shirts, and his shoes.

And then there is the case of SouthCom spokeswoman Mercedes Morris, who was arrested on April 24 by Panamanian authorities in possession of 2.6 grams of cocaine and 6.2 grams of marijuana, which she admitted were for her own consumption, according to Panama's Attorney General Carlos Villalaz. Morris, whose father is chief of security for the Panama Canal, was released to the custody of the Southern Command until her trial for drug possession. She immediately returned to her job as SouthCom spokeswoman, where one of her chief duties is accusing General Noriega of being a drug trafficker.