

Panama report by Carlos Wesley

Noriega's comeback

Vice President Guillermo Ford has resorted to blows in response to people's cries of "We want Noriega!"

Guillermo "Billy" Ford, U.S.-installed vice president of Panama, was involved in a drunken street brawl on Feb. 11 in the town of Penonomé. According to various press reports, Ford exchanged blows with Rolando Guillén, an official in the former government of Gen. Manuel Noriega. Ford is a self-styled macho he-man. Last year, he derided the Panamanian police, headed by his fellow Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderón, as a bunch of "faggots." In 1989, Ford became the poster boy of the Bush administration's efforts to oust Noriega, when he got bopped in the head in an earlier brawl. During that incident, Ford was filmed with his shirt drenched in the blood of his bodyguard, and his face on every U.S. television screen.

What the Bush administration took pains not to publicize was Ford's links to drug-money laundering. Ford was one of the co-owners of Dadeland Bank of Miami, an institution notorious for its involvement in drug-money laundering, such as the case of Gonzalo Mora, Jr. who pled guilty last year on charges stemming from his role as the Medellín Cartel's top money launderer. According to the *Miami Herald*, last year another Medellín Cartel figure, Ramón Milian Rodríguez, also fingered banker Ford as one of his drug money-laundering partners.

There are differing accounts as to why Ford resorted to fisticuffs against Guillén. The one almost everyone reports is that Guillén saw Ford at the *culecos* (a bacchanalia where people

dance in the streets, drench passersby with water, and forcibly paint each other's faces) and provoked people by shouting, "What do you want?" When they chanted in reply, "for Noriega to come back!" an irate Ford lunged at Guillén.

More than any serious expectations that Noriega will leave his Florida imprisonment and return to power any time soon, the Mardi Gras incident underscores the frustration of the Panamanian people with what has happened and what has not happened since the U.S. invasion.

The Bush administration has not kept its promises to help Panama rebuild. Estimates are that Panama suffered as much as \$7 billion in damages from the invasion and the preceding months of economic sanctions, and even the U.S.-installed government said that at least \$3 billion were needed to "jump start" the economy. But the U.S. only approved a niggardly \$460 million, and very little of that actually reached Panama's needy. Most was spent inside the U.S., to pay off Panama's debt to the American banks owned by Bush's backers.

Panama's phone company, its sugar mills, railroads, airlines, and even the public ports are being sold off at bargain prices to pay off foreign creditors. "We might as well sell some of our properties to pay the debt," said Comptroller General Rubén Dario Carles, according to *Journal of Commerce* on Feb. 12. Nonetheless, Ambassador Deane Hinton, the U.S. proconsul, insists that "U.S. aid to Panama has been extremely gener-

ous," reported the *Financial Times* on Feb. 18. Hinton, say some who know him, is extremely contemptuous toward Panamanians, even including the ruling troika.

People also resent the U.S. because President Bush, just as he is now telling the people of Iraq that his war is only with Saddam Hussein, had earlier told the Panamanians that, all we want "is to get Noriega"; we do not seek the destruction of the country, nor do we have any quarrel with the Armed Forces. He lied.

To this day, Bush is stonewalling on the number of Panamanian civilians killed during the invasion, which numbered at least 4,000. The Panamanian Defense Forces have been destroyed. The vacuum is being filled by the U.S. occupation army. "There is virtually no aspect of Panamanian government that the Americans are not directly involved in," the *Financial Times* reported. "At times, Panama appears to be little more than a U.S. laboratory for experiments in 'nation-building,'" it added, "with Washington calling all the shots, while appearing to defer to Panamanian wishes."

In the latest example of that sort of manipulation, Ambassador Hinton has been telling everyone that the U.S. will absolutely not renegotiate the Carter-Torrijos treaties, which call for Panama to assume full control of the Panama Canal and related military bases by the year 2000.

At the same time, Panamanian legislator Leo González, who belongs to the MOLIRENA party of Billy Ford, has introduced legislation, at the behest of the U.S., calling for the treaties to be renegotiated. "Panama is not ready take over the Canal," said González, adding that the bases should remain "because the only thing the Americans have ever brought us are money and good stuff."