

General Noriega defies Philippines model for destabilizing Panama

by Peter Rush

On June 14, Panama's Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega issued a statement saying, "I am not going to resign nor leave Panama. This is not the Philippines, nor am I Marcos. Nor is this Haiti. They are trying to force us into a mold that doesn't fit."

New information now confirms that the same State Department networks that coordinated every aspect of the destabilization and ouster of Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos last year, are in place in the U.S. embassy in Panama City, attempting to replay their scenario against the commander of the Panama Defense Forces, General Noriega.

The State Department desk officer who coordinated the anti-Marcos opposition campaign leading to his ouster, John Maisto, is currently the deputy chief of mission in Panama. Sources in Panama report that Maisto has personally created the kernel of the opposition movement, known as Modelo (Local Democratic Movement), in preparation for a Philippines-style ouster of Noriega. (He was similarly involved with anti-Marcos networks prior to Marcos's ouster, including with figures now serving in the Aquino cabinet.) U.S. Ambassador Arthur H. Davis also has assisted Maisto's efforts, working with the leader of the opposition movement and encouraging the military to stage a coup against Noriega.

Nine members of the Modelo group that Maisto helped create were denounced by the Legislative Assembly June 17 for being at the center of the conspiracy to topple General Noriega and the government. The nine include top businessmen and opposition political figures.

The Assembly resolution charged that the Modelo leaders were guilty of "seditious and subversive actions and high treason to the national government and the country," and called on the Panamanian legal system to "take measures to apply the full rigor of the law to the conspirators." The resolution revealed for the first time what had really happened behind the scenes, hidden by the public facade of street demonstrations and violence ostensibly aimed at Noriega for his alleged involvement in the murders of Gen. Omar Torrijos and terrorist Hugo Spadafora, and in vote fraud.

The resolution said that businessman Gabriel Lewis Galindo, an erstwhile supporter of the government, had, on behalf of the Modelo group, urged Vice-President Roderick Esquivel and other government officials, not only to dump Noriega, but to remove President Eric Delvalle, the entire Legislative Assembly, the Electoral Councils that run elec-

tions, and even the Supreme Court, and have the government taken over by a junta—a rather obviously treasonous proposition by any definition.

The role of Galindo

Lewis Galindo, a long-time backer of the government, has emerged as the central figure in the operation. As soon as the crisis erupted on June 10, Galindo appointed himself "mediator," and went through the motions of trying to mediate between Noriega and the opposition. He made it appear that Noriega had appointed him as a mediator, as a cover for coordinating opposition activities, and then turned around to tell Noriega that he was so hated in the country, that he had no choice but to resign, hoping to parley his "friendship" with Noriega into a cheap victory for the opposition.

When he saw that his gambit didn't work, he charged that he had been threatened by the Panama Defense Force (PDF) and had to flee for his life. In what has all the earmarks of a departure planned well in advance, he left, with his family, for Costa Rica, and then continued on to the United States almost immediately. On arriving in the United States, he announced he would "begin lobbying on behalf of the opposition to the government," and revealed that before leaving he had met with top opposition leader and president of the Panama Chamber of Commerce, Aurelio Barria, to map out the next phase.

Galindo is a former Panamanian ambassador to the United States. He told the *New York Times* on June 15, "I am going to travel to every country to tell people we have a criminal in charge of Panama. I have appointed myself international representative of the Panama opposition, and I am going to charter a plane and use every penny at my disposal."

Galindo is suspected of being the wealthiest man in Panama, and it can be assumed that he had taken precautions to make his fortune secure outside of the country well before his "sudden forced" departure.

Opposition's hand forced prematurely

It now appears that the opposition was surprised by events and forced to move prematurely. According to secretary general of the majority PRD party Ramírez Vázquez, the opposition had been planning to launch their destabilization and coup efforts later in the year, triggered by a series of terrorist

incidents. Ramírez Vázquez said that the plans of the opposition "were aborted by an error of calculation." Other sources report that the opposition had been biding its time, planning to wait until the government passed a World Bank-ordered bill to cut social security payments and raise premiums, intending to capitalize on the expected social ferment the measure would cause.

This information explains both how the opposition was able to coordinate and launch its street actions within hours of the publication of wild charges against Noriega by Col. Díaz Herrera, and also why it has so far lacked the depth it undoubtedly had hoped to build up by later in the year. General Noriega's timing in forcing the resignation of Col. Díaz Herrera on June 5 confronted the opposition with the necessity to move immediately. Díaz Herrera was, for them, their "Ponce Enrile," their "man close to the throne with the goods."

The opposition has refused to publish Col. Díaz Herrera's purported "evidence" against General Noriega, nor have they emphasized the fact that Díaz Herrera is well known for his connection to drug trafficking, and his great friendship with Fidel Castro, which he admitted in his "confession" which started the destabilization.

The Church under Archbishop McGrath has dropped its mantle of impartiality and come out four-square for the opposition. Díaz Herrera had deposited his "proofs" with the Archbishop, but they have yet to see the light of day, undoubtedly because they are fraudulent. But the Church, in the person of Monsignor Oscar Brown Jiménez, told a large crowd that "the protests can and should be made, because there are reasons for them."

Nonetheless, despite the efforts of the U.S. press to play up the rioting and demonstrations, the number of participants has been small. The largest crowd to showed up for a protest was 3,000. The Chamber of Commerce called a strike of stores and other establishments in Panama City and Colon, which has now fizzled under threat of fines against striking store owners, revealing the lack of conviction of the businesses involved.

Attempting a Philippines rerun

In 1985, working from Washington in coordination with U.S. Philippines Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, John Maisto revealed in an interview Aug. 6, that he and others in the State Department were working directly with a dissident group within the Philippines military to overthrow Marcos. He maintained very close ties with the Philippines opposition in the United States, including with the wife of a present cabinet minister. His own wife is Filipino. His subsequent assignment to Panama is now following a similar course.

He is responsible for setting up the Modelo group, whose base is in the business community in Panama City, largely the Chamber of Commerce. Two months ago, he arranged for a delegation including the head of the Chamber of Commerce, Aurelio Barria, to take a trip to the Philippines, the

purpose of which was obvious.

His nominal boss, Ambassador Arthur H. Davis, has made no attempt to hide his efforts to topple Noriega. He is a protégé of Sen. Jesse Helms, and his appointment was part of the Reagan administration's payoff to Helms for Helms's agreement not to oppose the nomination of Richard Burt as ambassador to West Germany. In his confirmation hearings, he said that he saw his role as bringing "democracy" to Panama. Davis's previous assignment was ambassador for many years to the Paraguay government of dictator Alfred Stroessner, whose brutal regime provoked no similar concern on his part.

Davis's efforts to topple Noriega are legion, and common knowledge in Panama. He met at least once with Lewis Galindo after the crisis began, and also with opposition leader Nicolás Arias Calderón and others. He also reportedly met with senior officers of the Panama Defense Forces on June 13 and asked them to "no longer recognize Noriega," to take control of the armed forces and call for new elections, according to a report in the *Washington Times* of June 15. The State Department confirmed that he was meeting with "a whole variety of people across the political spectrum."

Noriega strikes back

But parallels to the Philippine destabilization end at General Noriega. In remarks given to the Mexican paper *Excelsior* June 14, he revealed a keen appreciation of the incoherence of Washington's policy toward Panama. Asked if a "hidden hand" was out to get him, he said, "The U.S. Government is so large that one must make distinctions. . . . We must be analytical. . . . I think that there is a group of conservatives who are traditional enemies of Panama, in the sense they believe Panama is their colony and they don't want to return the territory and canal." The reference to Jesse Helms, and his on-the-scene operative Davis, is unmistakable. Noriega also denounced two think tanks in Germany, the Konrad Adenauer and Hanns Seidel Foundations, for working with the

But Noriega also understands the nature of the opposition. It has been limited to students and the middle class. Much has been made in the press of the twice daily clanging of pots and pans and waving white handkerchiefs. One member of the Legislative Assembly commented that only the pots and pans of the poor overthrow governments, and that the pots and pans of the rich, such of those of the opposition in Panama, "are made of teflon and don't make noise." One European television station accurately characterized the movement as a "designer revolution."

Noriega warned the United States not to intervene, because "that could produce a class war here, of rich against poor." The fact is, as acknowledged in a June 18 column by Cord Meyer in the *New York Post*, Noriega and the majority Revolutionary Democratic Party command the support of the country's poor, who have not entered into the anti-government demonstrations. This weakness of the opposition ac-

counts for the rapid collapse of the strike movement and the return to near-normal life throughout the country, little over one week after the first protests. Despite charges of police brutality, Noriega has insured that the police and military have used non-lethal force, and have not given the opposition martyrs with which to expand their movement.

The next phase

The real test for Noriega and the Delvalle regime is only now coming up. According to New York banking sources, the World Bank, notorious for its politically motivated demands on victim Third World countries, is the "linchpin" of efforts to squeeze Panama economically. The World Bank has demanded layoffs in the public sector, reductions in social security benefits, and "reprivatization" of the economy, all precalculated to cause severe social unrest, as the condition for \$50 million in loans, and an agreement on these measures with the World Bank is the condition the banks are demanding before they will consider discussing renegotiating Panama's \$4 billion foreign debt. Coupled with this, the opposition has sworn to conduct economic warfare, involving everything from not paying taxes to disrupting the transportation of food from the agricultural areas to the cities.

Perhaps even more important will be what the Reagan administration does now. In his June 18 column, Cord Meyer called on the administration to establish "the kind of high-level crisis management team drawn from State, Defense, NSC, and CIA that functioned so well [sic] in handling the Philippine problem." Meyer is explicit in saying that U.S. policy must be to get rid of Noriega, and offer him "a safe retirement," à la Marcos.

What is at stake?

At stake in the entire affair is the war against drug trafficking. General Noriega has been steadfast in his cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration in tracking and arresting drug traffickers using Panama for transshipment of drugs or laundering of drug money. The government passed exemplary legislation to permit violating bank secrecy in drug money laundering cases, which the DEA has urged other countries to copy. The head of the DEA, John Lawn, even sent a letter of thanks to Panama for its cooperation, most recently displayed in the two huge successful anti-drug operations *Operation Pisces* and *Operation Cashweb-Expressway*.

In contrast, one month ago, the opposition newspapers *La Prensa* and *Extra* attacked the Defense Forces and Noriega for cooperating with the DEA in Operation Pisces, on grounds that compromising banking secrecy would destroy Panama's banking industry. Leading figures in the present destabilization effort led the attack on the anti-drug effort last May, including Christian Democratic Party leaders Arias Calderón and Guillermo Cochez, who are columnists for, and on the board of, *La Prensa*. The two papers were supporters of the drive to dump Noriega.

Documentation

The following resolution, slightly abridged, was approved June 15 by the Panamanian Legislative Assembly:

The Legislative Assembly, considering:

First. The opposition political group, united with the traditional oligarchic group, has promoted public disorders of grave consequence for the nation, with intent to overthrow the national government.

Second. The conspiratorial group called Modelo, Local Democratic Movement, has been coordinated by Gabriel Lewis Galindo.

Third. That, according to Manuel Lewis Galindo, other members of the group include Fernando Eleta Almaran, Jaime Arias Calderón, Mario Galindo, Nicolás Ardito Barletta, Roberto Mota, Federico Hubert, Ricardo Arias Calderón, Roberto Aleman, and Bolivar Barceñas.

Fourth. That this group approached Dr. Rodrigo Esquivel, the vice president of the Republic, and several members of the General Staff and proposed that they overthrow President Eric Arturo Delvalle, dismiss General Noriega, dissolve the Legislative Assembly, dismiss the judges of the Supreme Court of Justice, and establish a government junta.

Fifth. That the traitors have threatened to solicit economic sanctions against the Republic of Panama, promoting hearings in the United States House and Senate.

WE RESOLVE:

First. To expose to national and international public opinion the plots headed by Gabriel Lewis Galindo for sedition, subversion, and high treason to the National Government and the Fatherland.

Second. To condemn the subversive actions promoted by the opposition, especially by the Christian Democratic Party, which cause social and political instability which could lead Panamanian society to confrontations between brothers.

Third. To publicly charge that the ultimate objective of those groups was to establish in the Republic of Panama a political regime which would let the United States remain [in the Canal Zone] after the year 2000, disavowing what was established by the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, especially, in respect to the foreign bases and troops remaining in our territory.

Fourth. To express our most energetic protest, because it has been proven that the cited group has the backing and direct intervention of some sectors of the United States Government and Senate. Therefore, we recommend the Ministry of Foreign Relations take appropriate measures in the light of this accusation.

Fifth. The citizenry expects that, as this assembly has done, the authorities of the Justice Ministry and the judicial branch make the conspirators testify and effect against them those sanctions clearly established in the penal code for such crimes.