

Andean Report by Mark Sonnenblick

Region is polarized on Panama

An Ecuadoran general has called for an Ibero-American army to defend Panama, but the socialists back the State Department.

Gen. Frank Vargas Pazzos, former commander of the Ecuadoran Air Force, has called for a "Latin American Army for the Defense of Panama." He made his statements in an interview published in the Quito daily *El Comercio* on March 17.

Vargas made a dramatic entrance into Ecuadoran politics in 1985, when he led a failed military coup against President León Febres Cordero. He was jailed. In March 1986, from his cell, he inspired the officers of an Air Force base to hold Febres captive for several days. This gesture gained Vargas international notoriety, but earned him the admiration of a good number of Ecuadorans. Febres, after all, had supinely followed the advice of the Reagan-Bush administration to radically reduce living standards. He had brought a severe depression by paying the foreign debt and by instituting "free market" economics.

What brings gala dinners at the White House may bring scorn in Ibero-America. Febres' party came in a poor third in the Jan. 30 presidential elections, just ahead of General Vargas, who had the disadvantage of campaigning while practically under house arrest.

Vargas, in his *El Comercio* interview, charged the United States with violating the Torrijos-Carter Treaties on the Panama Canal. He called for the formation of "a Latin American army for the defense of the canal . . . in the face of imperialist aggression which intends to convert Panama into another Grenada."

The general asked for "a post in

any trench, as just one more soldier who knows how to give his life if necessary to defend this noble cause."

To some, this may sound like Don Quixote dreaming of ages gone by. But, given that the Reagan administration is intent on making grade-B replays of Teddy Roosevelt's "gunboat diplomacy," Vargas's response is appropriate, and it struck a chord in Ecuador. His arch-enemy Febres became the first President to support Panama's March 18 request for an emergency meeting of the Latin American Economic System (SELA). Panama asked SELA to take measures to defend Panama from "undeclared economic warfare and a threat to Panama's national sovereignty." It asks the regional body to give Panama a reserve back-up for its own paper money.

One would have expected Peruvian President Alan García, the only leader in the region who does not raise his hand to ask Wall Street's permission to go to the bathroom, to have led the defense of Panama.

But García has prevaricated by calling for "accelerating the process of democratization" in Panama. This is interpreted by his foreign ministry and parts of his APRA party as support for U.S. pressures against Noriega.

García's problem comes precisely from the snakes in his party, the American Revolutionary Alliance Party, APRA. The majority of APRA sided with the State Department when it engineered the overthrow of the Argentine nationalist Juan Perón, in 1953.

Octogenarian APRA leader Luis Alberto Sánchez embodies the treasonous wing of APRA. Last year, Sánchez worked from the inside to sabotage García's bank nationalization and undermine the government. Sánchez, Peru's vice president, now praises Amulfo Arias, who was thrown out of the Panamanian presidency in 1941 for his open support for Hitler's ideas and his blocking of U.S. efforts to defend its merchant marine. Sánchez says Arias was "expelled by the most conservative Panamanian interests, naturally allied to U.S. interests." Sánchez demands "free elections" in Panama so the aging Nazi could be President once again.

APRA's treasonous wing was picked up by Nelson Rockefeller during World War II. Since then they have been run by the Washington nest called "the State Department socialists." Jeane Kirkpatrick and Elliott Abrams are contemporary members of that species.

In 1945, the "democratic socialists" formed the "Caribbean Legion," a regional insurrectionary force which, in 1948, invaded Nicaragua to overthrow the Somoza dynasty. They were the forerunners of the Sandinistas, and of today's Costa Rican-based Contras. These social democratic goons made Costa Rica a haven for flight capital, the mafia, and drug banker Robert Vesco—precisely the State Department plan for Panama now.

These are the rotten networks in various Ibero-American countries which the State Department is using to block regional support for Panama, such as that expressed by Ecuador's former Air Force chief. This may explain why García waffles on Panama while proclaiming that if Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega were to ask him to come as a symbol of Latin American solidarity, "I will be there."