

Ibero-American unity turns tide on Panama crisis

by Gretchen Small

The campaign of the "Project Democracy" U.S. secret government to overthrow Panama's institutions of government and defense, has blown up in its face.

Panama, the smallest of the Spanish-speaking nations of the Americas, was to be the test case for the projected U.S. role of imperial master of the Americas in the developing one-world condominium with Moscow. The result, however, has been otherwise: Panama's tenacious defense of its national sovereignty has set into motion the first steps toward the overall integration of Ibero-America's economies, which is required to defend production in each nation against international usury.

Ironically, this continental unity, potentially far greater than that forged during the 1982 Malvinas War, may prove to be the only force capable of blocking Moscow's plans to seize political hegemony in Ibero-America, as Ibero-America rebels against United States' imperial wars.

On April 22, Panama's National Information System announced that Mexico had agreed to supply Panama with 50% of its oil needs on easy credit terms, "until the difficulties of the present crisis are overcome." Thus, Mexico became the first government of Ibero-America to answer Panama's request to SELA (the Latin American Economic System), that its 22 member states help defend Panama from U.S. economic aggression.

Had Mexico not done so, Panama could have run out of oil by May. When the Reagan administration's cut-off of dollar flows left Panama without foreign exchange with which to pay for its basic imports, Panama turned to its "brother Latin American governments" for help, President Manuel Solís Palma explained on April 25.

Mexico's embassy in Panama reported that Mexico took this decision because of its government's belief that "it is imperative to make Latin American unity grow," citing Decision 271 of SELA, signed on March 29 by the foreign ministers of the SELA nations. That decision mandated SELA to "promote and coordinate" measures by member states to aid Panama against "the coercive economic measures taken by the government of the United States of America against Panama."

Other economic aid will follow. "The Mexican government has given us facilities to obtain oil, and it is also studying the possibilities of giving facilities to obtain certain raw

materials, food, and perhaps medicine," Panama's President, Manuel Solís Palma, reported on April 25. He added that Mexico was also "studying the possibility of helping us mint coins."

SELA executives arrived in Panama April 20, to work out the details of what Panama needs, so that SELA can provide other Ibero-American countries a centralized list of what they must provide if Panama is to survive. This includes aid to stabilize Panama's banking system, Finance Minister Orville Goodin reported on April 25.

Toward Ibero-America, away from IMF

The crack in the international blockade against Panama, allowed the government to proceed on its plan for internal reconstruction, even as U.S. economic warfare continues. On April 24, President Solís Palma announced a major change in his cabinet, bringing in new ministers of Agriculture, Planning, Foreign Affairs, Labor, Welfare, Education, and Public Works. This cabinet better responds to the "needs of our current situation," he stated at a press conference the next day, because it is prepared to mobilize "our main resource . . . Panamanians' unwavering desire to be always a nation, and never a colony."

Government spokesman Nils Castro reported that this cabinet has "fewer technocrats, will be more linked to Latin America, and will have less ties to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank."

Cabinet ministers at the press conference with Solís Palma reported on efforts to open new areas of production of physical goods, to replace huge banking and service sectors which U.S. warfare has shut down.

Priority attention is being given to agriculture, so that planting can be completed between now and June 30, Agricultural Minister Darisnel Espino reported. Preparation of land and sowing already began in the critical Veraguas Province, to be followed in Chiriquí, he noted, as part of a "large-scale effort to increase our national production."

Commerce and Industry Minister Mario Rognoni announced that his ministry has begun an inventory of the country's mineral resources, left unexploited since the last century. Industrial fishing has already increased in such areas as shrimp-fishing, as unemployed Panamanians seek to find new sources of income, he added.

Rarely has such an about-face in tactics been seen, as is now being exhibited in Washington from the plan of action which Secretary of State George Shultz and his sidekick bully, Elliott Abrams, promised to all would force Panama's General Manuel Noriega from power.

Reagan policy routed

Mexico's support for Panama had already been announced, when an interview with Abrams in Brazil's *Veja* magazine hit the stands. Abrams had bragged too soon that the administration "has discussed with all the democracies, requesting that they do nothing of aid or assistance to Noriega. Until now, all the countries without exception, maintain that certainly they will do nothing to support the general because they, too, want him to fall."

Not only is General Noriega still commander of the Defense Forces, but the government of Panama has survived 60 days of attack, and *strengthened* its position.

On April 24, the Reagan administration lost further ground, when Panama's Catholic Bishops read from every pulpit a letter calling U.S. economic sanctions against Panama "morally unjust," and requesting they be rescinded immediately. The U.S. measures have "badly hurt all the people, above all the poorest and humblest. As the church, and as Panamanians, we reject these measures that violate national sovereignty," the Bishops' said.

Isolated, the Reagan administration is now backtracking, speaking of dialogue where before no talk of "compromise" was allowed. White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater even admitted on April 28 that perhaps General Noriega will be granted the privilege of living in his own country. What has so far been missed, however, is that the *policy* itself is both wrong, and a strategic disaster—not merely the tactics adopted to implement the policy. It is the same failure to understand principles, which has caused U.S. officials to express "surprise and frustration" at the depth of support for General Noriega, and the military-civilian political alliance which he leads in Panama.

One administration official told the *New York Times*, the U.S. error was to "publicly" seek to overthrow General Noriega. For this fellow, "the mistake was suggesting he's going to be going in a couple of weeks."

To the *New York Times*, the problem has been one of "style." The "bullying, snarling style of Abrams risks antagonizing Latins," their April 27 editorial complained. The economic blockade of Panama was correct, but it was imposed "recklessly," they complain.

Sol Linowitz and his buddies insist that if they are handed the reins, they will work as "competent, professional diplomats," not only to get General Noriega out, but to tackle the "long-term problem" of how to restructure Panama's military altogether.

In the words of bank consultant Riordan Roett, "any kind of [Latin] figleaf would have been helpful. . . . Packaging is everything, and this wasn't packaged well."

So, two major tactics are now on the agenda, with hopes of saving the policy. The first, is simply to "get the Latins to do it." Here, Washington is counting on Moscow's allies in the Socialist International to provide the needed figleaf.

Elliott Abrams may have to be gotten out of the way, if Operation "Figleaf" is to succeed—even with the Socialist International. Abrams demonstrated the best of his diplomatic capabilities when he told *Veja* magazine, "I ask the countries of Latin America—Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay—if they are ready to seek another wave of coups in the hemisphere. If the answer is no, we must fight against Noriega until he is defeated."

Abrams's crude threat provoked official protests from the governments of Ecuador and Peru. The foreign ministries of both nations demanded explanations of Abrams's remarks, which they charged were "impertinent," and "inadmissible intervention in internal affairs."

There is a certain irony, however, in the fact that the man the Reagan administration is counting on to do the job Abrams cannot, is Gen. Vernon Walters—the very man who gave his word in 1981 to the Argentine Army, that the United States would remain neutral in any Argentine-British conflict over the Malvinas Islands!

Thrown in to support Walters's efforts, is the State Department's Panamanian President-by-video, Eric Delvalle, who announced from his hiding place on a U.S. military base in Panama on April 26, that he will be telephoning Latin American Presidents to press them to join a multinational military force against Panama.

"It's clear that Washington has not found the hoped-for echo in many capitals, including in Buenos Aires, to participate actively in the campaign to overthrow Noriega," the Argentine daily *Clarín* commented April 21. The best even the rabid anti-military President Raúl Alfonsín could promise Walters (currently touring the South American democracies in search of support) was that his government would be willing to help organize Venezuela to cover the United States' flank.

But in case Ibero-America won't do the job, the administration has set out to repeat. . . . Operation Contra!

Delvalle's State Department-based "ambassador," Juan Sosa, announced April 25 that a military command of exiled Panamanians has been established in Washington, D.C., which will mount "a series of economic, political, and military actions" inside Panama, which can deliver "a quick knock-out punch" against Noriega. In his interview with U.S. reporters April 26, Delvalle insisted that "military options by Panamanians are not a fantasy. . . . It's an option, and we're working on it."

Questions on this Panamanian Contra operation have already begun: Through which U.S. government channels will aid be channeled? Is this a CIA operation, or is it being run through the National Security Council? Are President Reagan and Vice President George Bush involved in the operation? Is Oliver North involved in any way?