

Neighbors won't do dirty work in Panama

by Robyn Quijano

The Reagan administration's attempt to get Panama's neighbors to oust Defense Forces chief Manuel Antonio Noriega has flopped. The crude attempt by the State Department's Elliott Abrams to "Latin Americanize the conflict," got nowhere, since none of the leaders of the region can politically afford to appear to be intervening on the side of a U.S. policy of economic aggression that has been universally condemned.

"It is necessary to call attention to the fact that the government of the U.S.A., not having achieved its purposes, neither by destabilization, nor by a merciless economic aggression, nor by the permanent threat of recourse to military force, now has begun a new phase in its strategy, looking to continue tricking public opinion in the U.S. and the world respecting Panama, and to be able, thereby, to prolong to the maximum economic asphyxiation, but without accepting any responsibility or blame," warned the Panamanian Foreign Ministry June 7. The statement charges the United States with using "all of its means of manipulation of information and fabrication of facts" to cover the truth, that the conflict is between "the will to be of a nation," and "a neo-colonialist" adventure.

The same day Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter condemned Washington's "Olympian disdain toward international law and reason," in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly. The Foreign Ministry also attacked the incessant pressure that the United States exerts "against all countries, trying to make them passive accomplices of its determination to maintain Panama as a nation under siege, in violation of the most elementary norms of international law." Panama "will welcome statements from friendly nations directed to end U.S. economic aggression, in order that the national government be respected and recognized, that the interests of the majority of its population be safeguarded, and that the Panama Canal Treaties be fulfilled."

Such statements have come from many quarters. The International Labor Organization issued a special declaration on Panama, calling for "cessation" of economic warfare measures "and respect for the sovereignty and self-determination of the Panamanian people," at its meeting in Geneva June 8.

Elliott Abrams's mere proposal that Ibero-American democracies should help overthrow General Noriega is "offensive," Ecuador's former Foreign Minister Julio Prado Vallejo told the press June 3. The announcement by Abrams that he

had ordered U.S. ambassadors to consult with Ibero-American leaders on dealing with Panama, "presumes that these constitutional regimes would be willing to turn themselves into accomplices of grave and most reprehensible violations of the principles and norms of community proclaimed by the American nations."

Ecuador's present foreign minister, Rafael García, issued a brief statement upon leaving for the Non-Aligned Nations meeting, that Ecuador remains opposed to any intervention against another state. Retired Ecuadorian Air Force Gen. Frank Vargas, in a letter printed in Panama's press June 5, repeated his call for an Ibero-American army to be formed to defend Panama against "imperialist aggression that [is] installing the policy of the 'big stick,' strangling the economy, abusing as always its economic power with the vain hope of trying to force a people which is fighting for its dignity and self-determination to its knees."

Ecuadorian nationalists were hard hit on June 3, when Ecuador's Air Force minister and six of the Air Force's high command were killed in a plane crash. *La República* of Panama denounced the accident as part of a pattern of electronic warfare. On May 15, three Panamanian planes, all in one area, lost instrumentation suddenly and were forced into emergency landings. No reason could be found for the failures. One of the planes was carrying General Noriega. *La República* denounced the events as U.S. use of microwave technology to assassinate Noriega. The author reminds his readers of the hideous chain of air "accidents" that wiped out three important nationalist leaders in 1981: Panama's General Omar Torrijos, Peruvian nationalist Gen. Hoyos Rubio, and Ecuadorian President Roldos.

Genocidal sanctions

The economic sanctions the Reagan administration imposed against Panama in March, have already devastated Panama and destroyed the private sector completely. Even if the United States lifts sanctions by the end of June, 40,600 more Panamanians will be left unemployed as a result of sanctions. If the sanctions continue in force, the government estimates, 53,600 will be left without jobs. Already, consumption of eggs, milk, and meat has plummeted, collapsing poultry and cattle production.

Overall economic activity has already dropped 15.1% below that of 1987; if the sanctions continue, the collapse will probably reach 20.2%. This means that Panama will produce and sell one-fifth less than it did in 1987. The price tag on the damage: over \$1.2 billion already, rising to \$1.5 billion if the sanctions stay.

The construction industry is completely paralyzed. Even if sanctions are lifted this month, construction will probably reach 12% of 1987 levels. In the first three months of 1988, cement production has collapsed 40%. Total investment may be 10% of what it was in 1987. No Ibero-American leader can take responsibility for this, knowing too well his nation could be next.