

## Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

### U.S. attempts to provoke war

*With other Ibero-American nations refusing to destroy Panama, the U.S. is heading straight into a new Vietnam war there.*

**G**en. Marc Cisneros, the commander of U.S. Army South in Panama, said July 8 that the United States should use military force to oust the commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega.

Cisneros dismissed efforts by the Organization of American States to mediate the crisis. The OAS, he said, will not act "firmly" in carrying out U.S. demands to dislodge Noriega. "Speaking for myself," Cisneros told the press, "I believe this is the moment for military intervention in Panama."

Desperate to provoke a confrontation, the U.S. general has ordered his troops to invade Panamanian towns. On July 1, a U.S. infantry company took over the Panamanian township of Gamboa, on the banks of the canal, with a display of Chinook helicopters, armored personnel carriers, and other heavy weaponry, and occupied the town for 24 hours. On July 2, U.S. troops, supported by Black Hawk helicopters and tanks, invaded the town of Chilibre and took over Madden Dam and the water purification plant that supplies Panama City and Colon, the nation's second largest city.

Two days later, U.S. helicopters buzzed PDF headquarters in Panama City and conducted low-altitude flights all over the city. On July 8, two dozen U.S. tanks surrounded the area where General Noriega's command post is located in Fort Amador, because a spent bullet had allegedly been found in the home of a U.S. colonel, which purportedly had come from an AK-47 rifle "apparently fired from a nearby

PDF building."

So far the PDF has refused to take the bait. But the U.S. war games in Panama could degenerate into an all-out confrontation, "of grave consequences for the civilian population and the country's peace," warned Panama's Foreign Ministry.

General Cisneros, when asked how he would go about an attack, said he would issue an ultimatum to the PDF saying that they had 30 minutes to surrender. "I believe most of the officers of the PDF will accept" the ultimatum, he said.

But if there is anything that both the friends and detractors of the PDF and General Noriega agree on, it is the fact that despite more than two years of enormous pressures, they have stood up to repeated U.S. demands that they surrender Panama's sovereignty. Not only will the PDF fight, but they are likely to be joined by large portions of the civilian population, particularly those organized in the popular militias, the Dignity Battalions.

This was made clear in a letter delivered to Cisneros by the commander of the Battalions, Benjamin Colamarco, who led a contingent of 200 militiamen on a peaceful march to the American general's headquarters on the 4th of July. The people of Panama "are willing to make a sacrifice of love and to offer their own lives to continue to deserve the honor, dignity, and privilege of being Panamanians," said the letter. It praised the U.S. War of Independence for being "an exemplary page in the history of mankind." But since then, it said, U.S. soldiers

"have been separated from the noble purposes that encouraged their military ancestors in their struggle against the British colonialist army."

The shift to the military to rescue the administration's insane Panama policy is fueled by the realization that the OAS is no longer in the mood to do the bidding of the U.S., particularly since June 18-19, when the hemisphere's legislators declared their support for Panama at the Conference of Latin American Parliamentarians for Panama.

Diego Cordovez, Ecuador's foreign minister and chief OAS negotiator on the Panama question, rejected outright the idea that the OAS will do the U.S. administration's dirty work. The OAS, he said on July 7, "cannot go there and make statements as if it were an electoral tribunal and dismiss officials, as has been suggested."

Hoping to salvage the diplomatic option before the OAS meets on July 19, the Bush administration has called on Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, to try once more to convince Noriega to leave. Pérez sent a diplomatic mission by private plane to Communist Cuba July 9 to enlist the support of dictator Fidel Castro, on the assumption that "he can exercise more influence on the Panamanian strongman," reported the Venezuelan daily *El Nacional* July 12.

But Pérez's meddling was dismissed by Panama's President Manuel Solís Palma. "Pérez seems to have an obsession with Noriega," he said, and he "is showing total compliance toward Bush's demands." As for Noriega leaving, Solís Palma said: "If Panama signaled to the United States that we are prepared to reach an understanding on this, I assure you that in a matter of weeks, the U.S. would say that Noriega has nothing to do with drug trafficking and that our government is the best in the world."