

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Non-Aligned nations back Noriega

Most of the movement's 102 members demanded that the U.S. honor the Canal Treaties and withdraw the extra troops.

Meeting in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, the Non-Aligned Movement adopted a resolution on Sept. 8 demanding that the United States honor the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, withdraw the additional troops sent to Panama by President George Bush last May, lift its economic sanctions, and allow the Panamanian people the right to choose their own government without outside interference.

The Non-Aligned leaders voted for Panama after listening to an eleventh-hour statement by the commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega, which was read by Vice President Carlos Ozores. In his statement, Noriega—whom the United States government has been trying to force out on drug-trafficking charges which it knows to be untrue—said that “the anger of the U.S. administration against my country, is the result of our outright rejection of American attempts to force us to participate, with troops and special units of the Defense Forces, in the aggression against the sister nation of Nicaragua.”

This was a reference to the blackmail threat issued in a December 1985 meeting with Noriega by Iran-Contra figure, Adm. John Poindexter, then U.S. National Security Adviser, that Noriega either back the Contra policy against Nicaragua, or be crushed by means of false accusations of being a drug trafficker.

Noriega charged that the U.S. military in Panama daily deploys thousands of troops, tanks, and aircraft into areas under Panamanian jurisdiction,

“publicly expressing the U.S. administration’s contempt for Panama’s sovereignty and threatening a military intervention.” Given this situation, he stated, “I must inform you that the Panamanian Defense Forces, together with the people of Panama, will continue to resist, for as long as necessary, whatever the circumstances created from abroad.” Panama, he added, is faced with the choice “of continuing to belong to the concert of free nations or being a colony. . . . It is a question of an invaded country, which has as its main obligation to break the yoke of a rude intervention in its internal affairs, which is undermining its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and the basic rights of its citizens.”

The resolution was a slap at Venezuela’s President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had demanded that the Non-Aligned Movement condemn Noriega, and claimed, “I have the right, Latin America has the right, to intervene in Panama to ensure that there is a democratic regime.” He was turned down by the overwhelming majority of the countries, including Peru and Ecuador, who, he felt, “betrayed him,” according to the Mexican daily *Excelsior* Sept. 9. Adding insult to injury, the Non-Aligned countries also rejected outright Pérez’s bid to have Venezuela host the movement’s 1991 Inter-ministerial meeting.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration announced on Sept. 12 that it will continue its campaign to oust Noriega, by tightening the economic sanctions against Panama. At the same time, the propaganda campaign

charging Noriega with drug trafficking assumed Goebbels-like proportions. The U.S. media asserted almost daily and without substantiation, that “it is believed that members of the Colombian Medellín cocaine cartel have been given asylum by Noriega in Panama.” The U.S. State Department has been forced to admit the U.S. government cannot confirm this charge.

In fact, under Noriega’s leadership, Panama’s Defense Forces have intensified their anti-drug efforts since Colombia launched its war on the drug cartel. Colombia’s leading anti-drug daily *El Espectador* reported Sept. 9, that the PDF has arrested nine Colombians involved in drug trafficking, and confiscated 100 kilos of pure cocaine that they were attempting to smuggle into the U.S. through Panama.

President Bush has rejected a plea issued on Sept. 2 by Panama’s new President, Francisco Rodríguez, for the U.S. to stop its attacks against Panama, “which, in the final analysis, does not help many sensible and reasonable interests of theirs which we recognize and accept.”

Bush has refused to recognize the legitimacy of Rodríguez’s government, setting the stage for openly repudiating the Canal Treaties, which call for Panama to nominate the new canal administrator as of January 1990.

Instead, according to an article by syndicated columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak column in the *Washington Post* Sept. 11, Bush’s plans “could include a tightly controlled military strike” against Noriega. Even U.S. ally Carlos Andrés Pérez had to say that in the event of a military intervention, “I would lead Venezuela in opposition.” But, say Evans and Novak, the administration believes that “the escalated drug war and Noriega’s link to it have changed perceptions of both voters and Latin American politicians.”