

Dateline Mexico by Isaias Amezcua

Corrupt officials slander Noriega

Contrary to lying charges appearing in the Mexican press, Noriega does not own an illegal steroids lab in Tijuana.

With headlines such as "Partner of Panamanian Strongman Caught" and "Noriega's Mexican Partner Arrested," most Mexican media went wild with a totally false story linking Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega with a Tijuana pharmaceutical company indicted for shipping mislabeled steroids into the United States. The false labeling—of Noriega—was suspiciously concocted by Mexican officials trying to ingratiate themselves with Washington.

Yet U.S. Customs officials have denied that the allegations have any basis in reality.

The faked "news item" was put out on the afternoon of Oct. 4, shortly after Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had given a speech to the U.S. Congress in which he did not satisfy the admonitions of the Bush administration that he condemn Noriega by name. The folks at the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency were hardly pleased that Salinas had failed to provide them with a desperately needed veil of Ibero-American support for their botched efforts to capture or kill the Panamanian leader.

The story that Noriega owned a sleazy steroids lab was apparently fabricated by scurrilous Mexican officials to pressure Salinas into condemning Noriega by name.

The libel was based exclusively on a wire issued by Notimex, the Mexican government press agency. Notimex reported statements allegedly made by Attorney General Enrique Alvarez del Castillo, that documents mentioning Noriega had been found

by the Federal Judicial Police when they raided the offices of Milano Laboratories in Tijuana in April. Alvarez supposedly said the documents name Noriega as the company's prime owner. Notimex said that all the company's managers had escaped the raid. Another strange aspect to the story is that the Attorney General's statements are normally widely reported. In this case, no independent media confirmed them.

The case only reappeared in Mexico's press on Oct. 10, in a release by Deputy Attorney General Javier Coello's office. Coello is notorious among Mexican police, politicians, and press for his driving ambition to become Attorney General and for the extralegal methods he uses to "solve" cases. He is also willing to flout the law—and President Salinas's dictums on official morality—to protect his own political machine. He is refusing to turn even for disciplinary action—his bodyguards who were indicted in September for gang rape of young girls.

Coello's press release said the police had arrested Javier Macklis, Milano lab's chairman of the board, in Mexico City upon his return from Japan. He was brought directly from the airport to Coello's office. Coello blindfolded him and presented him to the public investigator, according to the official daily, *El Nacional*. Coello's press release claimed that Macklis then "confessed" that Noriega had financed the labs with an \$800,000 investment.

Coello's maneuver soon backfired. The Oct. 12 *Washington Post* re-

ported, in an article entitled, "Noriega Said to Profit From U.S. Athletes' Steroids," that "David Shaw, assistant special agent in charge of Customs in San Diego, said yesterday that while the Mexicans have shared some documents seized in the lab raid, they have not shown U.S. authorities anything linking Noriega to the lab. 'We know nothing of these facts,' said Shaw, whose office has conducted the steroid investigation." Shaw's statement was reprinted in Mexico the next day.

The daily *El Diario de México* Oct. 11 suggested that Macklis's "confession" was part of a "deal" he had made with Coello. The newspaper said that the police had actually arrested Macklis's son when they raided the drug company, but the judicial authorities had "suspiciously" released him. The rumors here are that, to free his son, the father volunteered to lie about Noriega.

Among Tijuana business circles, one can hear that the real owner of Milano is Jorge Hank Rhon, the son of Carlos Hank González, the secretary of tourism in Salinas's government. The story there is that Hank quietly injected the anabolic steroids made by his Milano labs into race horses at the Agua Caliente track in Tijuana. Hank is the general manager of that big-bucks gambling center.

On Oct. 16, Panamanian Ambassador to Mexico Jorge Turner delivered the *coup de grâce* to the dirty maneuver against Noriega. He sent an official letter to the press in which he explained that the Panamanian medical service had made a rush \$882,262 medicine purchase from Milano and had deducted \$139,987 from that because it received a substandard product. He stated, "There is no official, personal, or business link between Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and Laboratorios Milanos, nor with Mr. Juan Javier Macklis Mercado."