

The 'conspiracy of silence' on Panama

by Valerie Rush

The full truth of the death and destruction caused by George Bush's murderous rage against Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and the people of Panama is finally coming to light. On Jan. 6, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark gave a press conference in Panama City at which he condemned the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the thousands of civilian deaths and illegal civilian arrests in the invasion of Panama. "There is an obvious strong motive not to count bodies by governments. But attention must be paid. History demands to know, humanity demands to know, the future demands to know how many were killed," Clark said.

Clark spent four days in Panama, conducting his own investigations on behalf of several human rights organizations and family members of disappeared persons. Clark said that he had spoken to all of the organizations congregated in Panama who are supposed to know the number of civilian casualties—the International Red Cross, hospitals, and human rights groups—and yet none did.

Commenting on the latest official reports of fewer than 100 civilians killed, Clark said he had consistently heard estimates of 4,000 dead, with some estimates as high as 7,000. Clark insisted that mass graves would not have been needed for the numbers the Southern Command was putting out. He also reported that he had personally seen one such "common grave," 40 yards long, six yards wide, and five yards deep. It was filled with bodies.

Clark pointed to the poor Chorillo area of central Panama City, which was flattened in an attack on Noriega's headquarters. He said the area was densely populated, and hit during the night when people were asleep. There was nowhere to flee to.

Clark also detailed how the U.S. military is going around with political "enemies lists" to illegally detain civilians—including labor leaders, student activists, and former government officials—who are thought likely to form an opposition to the U.S. occupation and its puppet government. The commander of the U.S. invading forces, Gen. Carl Stiner, said, according to Reuter, that the job of U.S. forces in Panama is to uproot "the leadership and the infrastructure of any dissident groups." Under this policy, 15,000 have been rounded up, including labor leaders Mauro Murillo and Gustavo Martínez; former Minister of Industry and Commerce Elmo Mar-

tínez Blanco, who is also a former ambassador to Sweden; former Minister of Labor George Fisher; economist Rafael Mezquita; and newspaper publisher Escolastico Calvo. They are being held in concentration camps run by the U.S. occupation authorities. None of them is charged with any crime.

Clark charged that the invasion violated international law as well as the three treaties which protect Panamanian sovereignty. He noted that just in the occupation of the School of Public Administration at the University of Panama, more U.S. soldiers were involved, than the whole of the invasion force sent in by Teddy Roosevelt to Panama in 1903.

Especially striking was Clark's refutation of the U.S. Southern Command's claim that the devastating destruction of entire areas of Panama City was carried out by the pro-Noriega Dignity Battalions and arsonists. Clark revealed that he had met with a leading Panamanian seismologist whose equipment for monitoring potential earthquake tremors made irrefutable recordings of 417 bombs dropped on Panama City during the first 14 hours of the invasion alone, five of them of "very high explosive power."

The media conspiracy

Clark's press conference, attended by some 30 reporters, was carried on Cable Network News in the United States, and a Reuters news agency wire went out on the story. Yet, except for a few sarcastic swipes at Clark's assertions by one or two major U.S. dailies, his denunciations received virtually no serious coverage by the U.S. print media.

Former presidential candidate Jesse Jackson garnered a few headlines when he added his voice to Clark's charges. On ABC's "Good Morning America" Jan. 8, he charged that "More people were killed . . . inside Panama City than in Tiananmen Square in China." He was immediately accused of "getting your information from Ramsey Clark." It wasn't until Jan. 10 that newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* began to admit that the official casualty figures left a rather large credibility gap.

Ibero-American coverage of the accusations, on the other hand, was widespread. Both Clark's and Jackson's charges were covered in many of Brazil's major dailies, including *Folha de São Paulo*, *Jornal do Comercio*, and *Tribuna da Imprensa*. The latter added an editorial comment that "The facts in Panama show that the U.S. plan was to conquer the whole region."

The leading daily of Mexico, *Excelsior*, picked up Clark's charges in a Jan. 10 editorial which called the Pentagon's casualty figures "unconvincing . . . they reaffirm that there does exist a campaign to hide this tragic and unjustifiable aspect of an operation presented to the public as something democratic and just."

In Europe, Clark's accusations were prominently covered in West Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the *Guardian* and *Times* of London, and the *International Herald Tribune*.