

# U.S. destroys fabric of society in Panama

by Carlos Wesley

In his State of the Union address on Jan. 31, President George Bush said that "the additional numbers of American troops" sent to invade Panama, will return to the United States before the end of February. If true, that means that the U.S. will still retain 13,500 troops in Panama, a number far in excess of the 10,000 authorized by the Panama Canal treaties.

But don't bet on those troops coming home anytime soon. Three days before Bush's speech, when Vice President Dan Quayle went to Panama to tell the U.S.-installed Panamanian President, Guillermo Endara, that the U.S. wanted to cut its forces to pre-invasion levels as soon as possible in order to start repairing its relations with Ibero-America, Endara said no. "We need the U.S. forces in Panama at this moment," Endara said. "Our forces are not quite capable of protecting life, property, and public order that the Panamanian people wanted," he added.

Endara's cry of impotence indicates the kind of monkey trap the Bush administration has created for itself in Panama. By imposing by force a regime made up of Panama's comprador class, the U.S. has ripped apart the entire fabric of Panamanian society and culture. Panama is no longer the oasis of peace and stability that it once was in violence-wracked Central America. Since the Dec. 20 invasion, Panama is fast becoming as ungovernable as any of the other countries in the war-torn region.

The U.S. now has to pay the price for its illegal and immoral invasion, by having to assume the imperialist burden of managing a colony in which the lawless action of its occupation forces is engendering general lawlessness.

U.S. forces in Panama are still taking political prisoners. On Jan. 25, U.S. occupation forces illegally detained Rómulo Escobar Bethancur, one of the chief negotiators of the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Panama Canal treaties. No charges have been brought against Bethancur, former head of the PRD party, and one of Panama's highest ranking diplomats.

On Jan. 30, Panama's *La Estrella* published a list of 18 detainees held for several weeks by U.S. occupation forces, who were to be transferred to Panamanian authorities. The information leaked to *La Estrella* by U.S. officials confirmed

that 10 of the 18 were being held "without charges," another three were being held "in preventive detention," and the remainder were jailed for "apologizing for crime," a non-existent offense.

Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark said on Jan. 28 that the arrest of Bethancur and of the many other Panamanians "taken prisoner by the U.S. military [and] whose whereabouts cannot be ascertained," is illegal. The U.S. government, said Clark, "has no legal authority under the U.S. Constitution, the Panama Canal Treaty, or any other body of international law" to carry out these activities.

The puppet Endara regime is also flouting legality. It suspended enforcement of Law 23, the Noriega-inspired law that modified Panama's bank secrecy to make it easier to identify and prosecute drug-money launderers. Now, it's resisting U.S. demands for even cosmetic modifications of the secrecy laws, claiming it will destroy what's left of Panama's offshore financial center.

Quayle returned from Panama bragging that he had gotten a pledge to establish more transparent banking. Not so, said Endara. "The changes we are talking about are not that major," said Endara. Earlier, Second Vice President Guillermo "Billy" Ford, a banker whose companies have been implicated in drug-money laundering, told Reuters that there was no need to change the law at all. "Secrecy will not be used for illegal purposes, period," said Ford. "They have a claim against an account, we have a judiciary now we feel proud of all the way up to the Supreme Court," he said.

That Supreme Court is headed by a chief justice appointed by the government without congressional confirmation, as required by Panama's constitution. He is Carlos Lucas López, a partner of Cali Cartel kingpin Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela in the drug-money laundering First Interamericas Bank.

But, by its very make-up, the Endara regime violates Panama's Constitution, says one of its supporters, Carlos Ivan Zuñiga, head of the small Popular Action Party (PAPO). Zuñiga denounced the government for issuing a decree abolishing Endara's constitutional role as chief executive and establishing instead a ruling junta. The decree says that Endara must get the unanimous consent of First Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderón and of banker Ford for any policy decision. This is akin to "playing the piano with six hands," said Zuñiga.

## No honor among thieves

The three adopted the troika concept, because they don't trust each other. Neither Endara nor the other two see their role as that of governing; that responsibility belongs to Uncle Sam. Rather, like thieves, their concern is how to split the spoils. Regarding posts in the new government, "the new rules of the game have been set: priority for members of the Union Club, preferably those who are white, but who must at least belong to the right families," said *Primera Plana*, a weekly

opposed to the invasion which managed to premiere on Jan. 27 despite the censorship imposed by the U.S. occupation.

Vice President Arias Calderón, who has the greatest political ambition of the three, has placed his Christian Democratic Party in charge of those government departments with the most patronage to dispense: Interior, Housing, Education, Public Works, and Health. Banker Ford has taken those dependencies that generate cash for his MOLIRENA party: Racetracks, the National Lottery, Casinos, the Colón Free Zone, Customs, the Treasury Ministry and the Comptroller General. Meanwhile, the corpulent Endara, despite representing the largest party in the coalition, finds himself with the presidency and little else. Perhaps that is because his party, which he inherited from pro-Hitler Arnulfo Arias, who was anti-Semitic, anti-Oriental, and anti-Black, managed to recruit a base from less privileged strata, attracted by Arias's populist rhetoric.

The troika members, and most of their supporters, come from Panama's upper crust, the comprador class known locally as "rabiblanco" (white asses), which traditionally has not been loyal to any principle, save making money. Their pathetic showing during the more than 30 months, during which the U.S. tried to use them to lead an opposition against the commander of Panama's Defense Forces (PDF), Gen. Manuel Noriega, proved their unwillingness to fight for anything. Virtually every strike against Noriega planned by the strategists at the U.S. embassy fizzled when this gang refused to shut down their businesses for fear of losing a day's profits. Such is their contempt for the blacks and mestizos who make up the majority of Panama's population, that they were never able to organize a mass base. So seldom were they willing to abandon the air-conditioned comfort of their cars to hold a demonstration, that the international press took to referring to them as "BMW revolutionaries."

The fact that not even the U.S. invaders' massive warfare propaganda machine could claim to have found a *single* political prisoner, not only speaks volumes about the true nature of the government headed by Noriega, but shows the lack of gumption of his opponents who now occupy the seat of government of Panama.

Since they came in, they have been destroying Panama's economy and dismantling all of the achievements of the revolutionary process initiated by Gen. Omar Torrijos in 1968, which Noriega continued until his overthrow. They have turned with particular viciousness against all those whom they perceive supported the previous government, including members of the now dismantled PDF, civil servants, the poor, blacks, mestizos, Indians—in short; against the majority. Former members of the PDF have been incorporated into a new Public Force, and garbed in uniforms "which look like those used by prisoners in U.S. army stockades, even the officers," say Panamanians. Orders are given by U.S. "instructors," who are armed with modern weaponry, while the Public Forces are issued only side-arms and nightsticks, to

fight criminals who are equipped with AK-47s and other heavy weaponry.

Members of the new body are sullen, disgruntled, and unwilling to do more than the minimally necessary to hang on to their paychecks. Violent crime has soared, and when people request the assistance of Public Force officers, their response is, "Call the Americans."

The city of Colón, always high in crime, has become a no man's land. Where before the PDF used to keep crime within tolerable levels, and the use of firearms by criminals was a rare occurrence, now there are almost daily shoot-outs between armed gunmen and U.S. forces in Colón.

Violent attacks against Americans in Panama were also rare before the invasion. But that changed with the armed robbery against David Baerg, Environmental Officer for the Panama Canal Commission, at his home on Jan. 21, and by the shooting death of the Commission's chief financial officer, William Joyce, Jan. 24.

An estimated 11,000 public workers have been dismissed by the government, and those remaining will experience drastic "pay cuts," said Iván Romero, Secretary General of the Christian Democratic Party, on Jan. 30. The same day Comptroller General Rubén Carles said that the government would have to reduce its payroll further, by privatizing state companies. The Public Workers Union has begun to mobilize against the mass lay-offs, by holding demonstrations and suing the Endara regime. Others have also begun to fight back.

Those left homeless by the destruction of Chorrillo, said they will sue the U.S. At a news conference Jan. 30, The Chorrillo War Refugees association charged that their houses were "bombed with laser beams, burned by the war of the U.S. government," not by the Dignity Battalions, reported *La Estrella* Jan. 31. They also charged that the U.S. placed the refugees in "concentration camps," and that the death toll was not 500, as claimed by the U.S. Southern Command, but between 5,000 and 7,000. A similar charge was made by Bishop José María Ariz of Colón and Bishop Rómulo Emiliani, of Darien, according to *La Estrella*. The two Catholic bishops said that "obstacles" have been created "by official Panamanian and U.S. circles" to cover up the exact number of deaths caused by the U.S. invasion.

Many in Panama reacted with glee when the censored local press carried the news on Jan. 24, albeit as a small item, that the "50 kilos of cocaine" the invasion force had previously announced it had captured at Gen. Noriega's headquarters, turned out to be a bunch of tamales wrapped in banana leaves. Three days later, the first issue of *Primera Plana*, the first uncensored newspaper to come out since the invasion, was sold out within hours of hitting the streets. "Everyone is asking for it. I have gotten dozens of calls," said a source. "Most want at least a copy of the editorial taken from the *Oakland Tribune* documenting the ties of the Endara government to the Colombian drug cartels."