

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Did U.S. agents arm Colombian mafias?

If Israeli investigators are right, Bush bears part of the blame for the estimated 7,000 Colombians murdered last year.

Col. Eduardo Herrera Hassan, who heads the security forces of the U.S.-installed Panamanian government—most of whose senior officials are partners of the Colombian cocaine cartels—has conducted Israeli-supplied weapons to Colombia's drug capos. This information about Herrera, who admits to being an agent of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, was provided by Israeli officials investigating how a large shipment of Israeli-made Uzis, rocket launchers, infrared nightscopes, and other weapons reached Colombian drug lord Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. The weapons were found by Colombian authorities after Rodríguez Gacha was killed in a shoot-out with Colombian police in December.

Israel claims its records show the arms were sold to the security forces of the tiny Caribbean island of Antigua. Antigua denies it, and says its territory was illegally used to transship the arms. According to the Israeli press, the weapons purchase was in fact arranged by Lt. Col. Yair Klein (ret.) for "Panamanian dissidents—including Eduardo Herrera, a former Panamanian ambassador to Israel and now head of its police—who wanted to oust [Gen. Manuel] Noriega," reported the *Washington Post* on May 7.

Last September, even before the weapons cache was discovered at the ranch of the dead Colombian drug lord, an arrest warrant was issued against Klein by Colombia's government, on charges of having trained the drug cartel's hit-squads. While admitting that he had hired mercenaries to train "self-defense groups," Klein, in a newspaper interview on Aug. 28,

1989, said he did not learn until later that the groups were tied to the drug lords. In another interview published Oct. 10, Klein was asked: "Do you feel any sorrow for what has been done in Colombia, and for the death and destruction your students have carried out?" No, he replied: "Is it the education minister's fault if his students smoke dope in the schools?"

Klein also attempted to open a school in Antigua for training Herrera's anti-Noriega invading force and other hitmen. The Antiguan government kept the school from opening, Klein's lawyer, Yigal Shapiro, told Reuter on May 9. Presumably the school would operate on a ranch owned by Maurice Sarfati, an Israeli citizen living in Miami. According to Reuter, the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharanot* said U.S. authorities suspect Sarfati was involved in the murder of an Israeli flower seller, Arik Afek, who knew about the Klein-Sarfati deal.

Sarfati, whose name appears as the purchaser of record for the weapons, got the Antigua ranch with guarantees provided by a U.S. government agency, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. OPIC has since reportedly put the ranch in receivership. According to the *Post*, "When the United States invaded Panama on Dec. 20 and toppled Noriega, the training school's mission became unnecessary and, according to the [Israeli] television account, the Panamanian sponsors requested that the weapons be shipped from Antigua to Panama."

Colonel Herrera has denied transferring the weapons to the Colombian drug lord, but Israeli officials say "the weapons were shipped to Panamanian

exiles who had links with [Rodríguez] Gacha and they sent the weapons to Colombia," reported Reuter on May 9.

Herrera was recruited by the U.S. government in 1987, while he was Panama's ambassador to Israel. In an Oct. 29, 1989 interview with the *New York Times*, he said that he was contacted by State Department official William G. Walker and asked to join the effort to topple Noriega. He met with officials at the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, and the CIA. Three weeks later he was fired by the Panamanian government. He came to live in the U.S. in May 1987, where he was paid \$4,500 a month by the CIA, out of Panamanian government funds seized by the U.S. as economic warfare.

The CIA claims it cut contact with him in April 1989, because his planned invasion could have resulted in the killing of Noriega. At that time U.S. law banned involvement by the U.S. government in the murder of foreign leaders—a ban lifted under the "Thornburgh Doctrine."

By the time the CIA supposedly ended contact with Herrera in April 1989, the Israeli operation headed by Klein was in place. Using U.S.-based Panamanian exiles, who were given Panama's government funds in the U.S. Treasury, a "consultant" was hired by the Israeli government to help Herrera to build his "Contra" force. The Israeli consultant provided a "breathhtakingly detailed" plan for removing Noriega, reported the *Washington Times* Jan. 23.

After the invasion, command of the police that replaced the Panamanian Defense Forces was first assumed by a Colonel Armijo. Armijo was soon fired to make way for Herrera—on charges of "corruption," based on information supplied by "U.S. intelligence agencies."