

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Bush orders another invasion

In an increasingly unstable situation, U.S. troops intervene to put down a coup attempt.

In the largest mass demonstration staged in Panama since last year's bloody invasion, 100,000 people marched on Dec. 4 through the streets of Panama City to defend the "right to life"—which to Panamanians means the right to a job, to housing, to education, to health care, and to all those other things which make a decent life possible, and which have been fast disappearing since George Bush ordered his invasion of Panama on Dec. 20, 1989.

The day before the demonstration, Bush, who was in Brazil, bragged that among his administration's proudest achievements in Ibero-America was the invasion of Panama, to restore democracy. Hours after he made this statement to the Brazilian press, he ordered the U.S. Army to again invade Panama City.

The pretext was a supposed attempt to overthrow the U.S.-installed drug-connected government of Guillermo "Porky" Endara. The purported coup was headed by an admitted CIA agent, former police chief Col. Eduardo Herrera, who is also an agent of the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad.

Herrera, who had been imprisoned on the island of Naos in Panama Bay on prior charges of conspiring against the government, was spirited from his jail cell on the island by a chartered helicopter soon after the demonstration ended peacefully at dusk on Dec. 4.

Following the U.S. invasion last year, Herrera was appointed head of the Public Force, the whistle-and-nightstick police force that replaced

the former Panamanian Defense Forces. Previously he had joined with the U.S. CIA in a plot to overthrow Gen. Manuel Noriega. A cache of Israeli weapons obtained by Gen. Pinchas Shajar (ret.), Col. Yair Klein (ret.), and other agents of the Israeli military industry and the Mossad for Herrera's anti-Noriega operation, instead went into the hands of Medellín cocaine cartel kingpin Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha.

In August of this year, Endara dismissed him from the police. In October, following an earlier labor protest against the government, Herrera was accused of conspiring with the protesters in a plot to overthrow the Endara government, and imprisoned at Naos.

The island from which Herrera staged his dramatic helicopter escape, is located within the security perimeter of Fort Amador, which includes, among other sensitive U.S. military installations, U.S. Navy headquarters in Panama and the residences of many high-ranking U.S. military officers. "If a private helicopter can breach U.S. security that easily, then I shudder to think what will happen to American troops when they have to face Saddam Hussein in Iraq," said one Panamanian.

After the escape, Endara said he was not worried about a military coup, because Panama no longer has a military, just a disarmed police force. The government also said that it was not requesting a U.S. intervention because it was unnecessary.

But, at 1:00 a.m. on Dec. 5, U.S. troops surrounded Panama's police

headquarters, and the U.S. Embassy issued a communiqué announcing that at the "request" of the Endara government, it was providing "military assistance" to put down the uprising and to help preserve democracy in Panama. By mid-morning on Dec. 5, Herrera surrendered to the U.S. forces without putting up a fight. He later said that his followers did not even have their weapons loaded.

Reportedly two police officers died in the rebellion. One, a lieutenant, was allegedly killed in cold blood by a U.S. soldier. Thirty-six other officers were arrested. The leaders of the "right to life" march were all fired, and arrest orders have been issued for more than 100 labor leaders.

"Herrera might be playing games, but the Panamanian people are not," said an eyewitness, who reported that as soon as the U.S. troops started arresting the Panamanian policemen who had been lured by Herrera, the crowds staged demonstrations demanding that the "Yankees go home" and stop interfering in Panama's internal affairs.

The protest also quickly became probably the first pro-Iraqi demonstration in the Western Hemisphere, as the people chanted "Saddam! Saddam!"

As this publication has been saying all along, the U.S.-installed government nominally headed by "Porky" Endara and other members of the local "comprador" class, all of whom are connected to drug banking, cannot rule without the U.S. military. Panama faces an increasingly unstable situation, akin to the succession of coups and the chaos that has prevailed in the Philippines since Corazon Aquino came to power in that country in 1986. That means that Americans are in Panama for the long haul, in an environment that is likely to turn more hostile—and bloodier.