

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

What if the U.S. defeats Iraq?

If "Operation Just Cause" is any indication, "Operation Desert Storm" is likely to end as "Desert Swamp."

Just about the time that George Bush started hostilities against Iraq, thousands of American soldiers in full battle gear were deployed to the Panamanian province of Chiriquí, more than 300 miles west of the Panama Canal. The soldiers, numbering 4,000 according to a statement issued by the provincial governor on Jan. 16, bivouacked on the grounds of the airport in David, the provincial capital.

When Bush ordered the "Operation Just Cause" invasion of Panama on Dec. 20, 1989, he said the troops were only there to "liberate" the country from Gen. Manuel Noriega. Just as he is now telling the Iraqis and the American people that the United States only aims at forcing Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait, Bush said that the U.S. was not interested in the long-term occupation of Panama, just in "restoring democracy." But more than one year after Just Cause, U.S. troops still occupy Panama, although their withdrawal has been announced at least three times since the 1989 invasion.

Compared to Iraq, Panama was a cakewalk for Bush's invaders. In Panama, because of the existing U.S. military bases, the invading GIs just had to roll out of bed to find themselves in the theater of operations; the supply line to the Persian Gulf is much longer. In Panama, the U.S. faced a tiny, lightly armed force; in Iraq it is confronting a large, trained army, experienced in warfare.

But there are similarities between Just Cause and Desert Storm. As was the case in Panama, U.S. planners are

relying on massive bombings of the civilian population to terrorize the leadership into surrendering. In Panama, at least 4,000, and as many as 7,000, most of them civilians, were killed by indiscriminate U.S. bombardments. In Iraq, that figure is likely to be at least one order of magnitude larger.

Were Desert Storm to result in a U.S. victory, it would not end U.S. military involvement in the Persian Gulf. That's indicated by what has happened in Panama since Just Cause. The main difference is that the occupation of Iraq and Kuwait will prove far more difficult than Panama has proven to be thus far.

Not that the going has been easy in Panama. "People are assaulting the GIs in Chiriquí" reports a correspondent. On Jan. 18, "a group of American soldiers was walking through Cervantes Park in David, and the shoeshine boys started spitting on them. Earlier that morning, a man took an American flag and tore it up in their faces as they drove down the main street, and onlookers started shouting 'Saddam! Saddam!'"

"Panamanians are not allowed near the tent city set up by the Americans at the airport. Security is very tight. They have installed at least two anti-aircraft batteries."

While the governor claims that the soldiers are in Chiriquí to help with "civic action projects," the only construction anyone has seen is related to what is believed will be a U.S. military base in the northern town of Guacala, and another American military

installation in Tolé, on the Guaimí Indian reservation.

Officials in Panama say the real purpose of the military deployment is to deal with a supposed "Arab terrorist threat." GIs in Chiriquí have taken control of the crossings on Panama's border with Costa Rica. The claim is that security in the area is threatened because many of the businesses there are owned by Panamanians of Palestinian or other Arab backgrounds.

Checkpoints have been set up all over Panama City. Buses and automobiles are required to stop and submit to random searches. Pedestrians are also being stopped and frisked by local cops under the supervision of American officers. These illegal police-state measures have increased popular resentment. Even people who support the U.S.-installed government "don't want the American soldiers here," said a Panamanian.

But "Arab terrorists" might not be the only, or even the real reason, for the high-visibility deployment. Last month, a small-potatoes rebellion against the U.S.-installed government, led by former police chief Col. Eduardo Herrera, a former agent of the Israelis and the CIA, required the U.S. to deploy 500 soldiers to put it down. U.S. forces also launched a massive manhunt last September, when General Noriega's former security chief, Capt. Eliecer Gaitán, disappeared from the Vatican Embassy in Panama.

The Jan. 21 *New York Times* reported that Gaitán, who is from Chiriquí, and a Capt. Jorge Bernal, are leading rebel bands armed with "Uzi and M-60 machine guns, M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles, gas masks and bullet proof vests . . . [and] RPG rocket launchers." A U.S. official told the paper that "there are no Panamanian forces who have the capability to stop these guys."