

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Congress debates impeachment

U.S. ships patrol the coastline—another step toward annexation, which is causing fissures in Endara's regime.

Panama's Congress debated in mid-March two separate motions of impeachment against U.S.-installed President Guillermo "Porky" Endara. They charged Endara with "abuse of power" and with "high treason" for his collaboration with a foreign power in surrendering Panamanian sovereignty.

Both motions stemmed from an incident last Dec. 5, when U.S. troops in full combat gear deployed into Panama City and occupied Panamanian government installations. The ostensible pretext for the military deployment—on the eve of the first anniversary of the bloody invasion ordered by George Bush in December 1989—was to put down a purported coup against Endara led by his former chief of police, Col. Eduardo Herrera (ret.), a confessed agent of the CIA who has also worked with the Israeli Mossad.

Panama's legislative body first took up the accusation drafted by attorney Gilberto Medina, a private citizen, who charged Endara with abusing his constitutional powers when he agreed to allow the U.S. soldiers to put down Herrera's rebellion. After more than four hours of deliberations, the rules committee of the legislature voted against the motion to impeach on March 14, because of "insufficient evidence."

The legislators again discussed impeaching Endara on March 19, when they took up a complaint brought by attorney Gonzalo Mocanda Luna, who charged that Endara had committed "treason against the fatherland" when he agreed to the intervention against Herrera. "The President has confessed to a shameful act,

which makes the nation a dependency of the government of the United States," charged Mocanda. The complaint, he said, was intended to warn the U.S.-installed troika—Endara and his two vice presidents, Ricardo Arias Calderón and Guillermo "Billy" Ford—that "if they are thinking of mortgaging the fatherland, it's not going to be easy, because we are not going to stand for it."

The legislators rejected the motion on March 19, in a decision that was not unexpected. What is significant is that the impeachment motions were given serious consideration by a legislature where the government coalition enjoys an overwhelming majority.

This precipitated a crisis between Endara and the rest of the troika. Vice President Ford, a banker who is a favorite of the Bush administration, claimed he was out of the country at the time of Herrera's uprising, and refused to say whether he agreed with the decision to call in the U.S. troops. Endara's wife blamed the impeachment proceedings on the Christian Democratic party of First Vice President Arias Calderón. "The Christian Democrats are against democracy, they are destabilizing the country," she said. The press printed Endara's picture with rifle in hand, and quoted him saying that he would "fight with blood and fire" to keep his post.

The real cause of the cracks in the coalition is the Bush administration's policy of creeping annexation and the economic crisis.

Thousands of those left homeless by the U.S. bombing during the 1989 invasion are still homeless, because

Bush, who insists that Iraq must pay war reparations, refuses to pay for the wanton destruction of Panama. Public employees are being fired, and more than a third of the country's labor force is unemployed. Senior citizens are next: There is a proposal before the legislature to raise the retirement age by five years.

Prisoners taken at the time of the invasion remain in jail without a trial. Such is the case with former legislator Rigoberto Paredes. Drug trafficking is up; so are armed robberies. On March 18, unknown gunmen escaped with \$225,000 from the Bank of India, the 30th bank robbed since December 1989. Such crimes were almost unknown before the invasion.

The aim is to destroy every institution and to discredit every Panamanian official, even those installed by Bush, to ensure that a permanent U.S. presence is seen as indispensable by the natives. For example, on March 21, Endara was to submit to the legislature a number of U.S.-inspired amendments to the Constitution that would abolish Panama's right to an army.

But, that will not mean the demilitarization of Panama. Foreign Minister Julio Linare's admits that as of three months ago, the U.S. Army was still patrolling Panama. On March 18, Bush's proconsul, U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton, signed an accord with Arias Calderón, by which Panama surrenders sovereignty of its territorial waters to the U.S. Coast Guard. The agreement, long sought by the Bush administration, grants the U.S. the right to patrol Panamanian coasts—under the Panamanian flag!

The Endara regime has decided that the accord "is not a treaty in the formal sense" and thus, it will not be submitted to the legislature for ratification, as required by Panama's Constitution.