

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Misrule of law

Under the regime of U.S. proconsul Hinton, political prisoners are being brutalized in Panama's jails.

Cleto Hernández is a black man who comes from Colón, Panama's second largest city. Like many others who come from humble backgrounds, not only in Panama but elsewhere in the world—including the United States, as illustrated by the case of Gen. Colin Powell—Hernández saw the military as a way to make something of himself.

Because of the reforms introduced by the late nationalist leader Gen. Omar Torrijos, Hernández was provided the opportunity. Through hard work and perseverance, he got a university education, became fluent in several languages, and rose to the rank of major in Panama's Defense Forces (PDF). That all came to an end when the U.S. invaded on Dec. 20, 1989. Hernández became a prisoner of war of the army sent by George Bush, and he has remained behind bars ever since.

At present, he is being held at the Renacer prison camp. "Apparently the camp is run by Panamanian authorities," said journalist Escolástico Calvo in a recent interview, who himself was held prisoner for almost a year after the invasion. "But the Americans go in and out whenever they feel like it." Why is Hernández being held? Because he once dared to arrest Susan Davis, daughter of former U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis, while she was illegally participating in an anti-government demonstration. That makes Hernández a nationalist and a potential dissident, which the occupation authorities will not tolerate. As the operational commander of the U.S. invading forces, Lt. Gen. Carl Stiner, said shortly after the inva-

sion, the U.S. mission is to "destroy the leadership and infrastructure of any dissident group." According to Stiner, "We've got to ensure that we root out these elements that are capable of disrupting the government."

Besides Hernández, "there are a goodly number of military [men] imprisoned in Renacer," said Calvo. Those include Col. Marco Justine, Maj. Francisco Córdova, Col. Nivaldo Madriñan, all jailed without trial since the invasion.

"Every day, they invent new charges against them," said Calvo, explaining the U.S. system of judicial terrorism in Panama. The charges range from the absurd to the Kafkaesque. Take the case of former legislator and university professor Rigoberto Paredes: "One of the accusations against him was that he murdered someone, hacked the body into pieces, put it in a trash bag, and threw it into a river. But so far, there is no body, the name of the alleged victim is not known, there is no one claiming a missing relative, and there are no witnesses.

"They also charge that Rigoberto Paredes abused the town of Arraijan (which repeatedly elected him by substantial margins, as their representative in Panama's legislature). That he went from house to house and stole dolls from little girls, and that he confiscated the baseball mitts, bats, and balls from the kids in Little League." That charge was backed up with a complaint signed by 500 residents of the town. Trouble is, "it has since been proven that every single one of those signatures was forged. But that man has been kept be-

hind bars for 16 months."

Benjamín Colamarco, former head of the citizens militia, the Popular Battalions, has also been kept in preventive detention since the invasion, charged with "conspiracy" for taking up arms (as required by Panama's Constitution) in defense of his fatherland. Former Attorney General Carlos Villalaz is jailed because of something a former subordinate is alleged to have done.

Not everyone is in jail. Former head of the National Bank, Rafael Arosemena, was granted political asylum at the Mexican embassy, former legislator Luis Gómez is at the Cuban embassy, and several officers of the PDF are at the Peruvian and Guatemalan embassies. But, the U.S.-installed government of Panama refuses to grant them safe-conduct out of the country, claiming they are common criminals and not political refugees, even though the Caracas Convention on Diplomatic Asylum, which Panama signed, explicitly states that the right to determine whether a person is being persecuted for political or for other reasons belongs exclusively to the state from which asylum is being sought.

Journalist Julio Ortega has to report weekly to a judge, having been framed on trumped-up charges because he dared criticize the puppet government. In late April, Ortega's wife got a letter from the Caja de Ahorros, a government institution originally established to help middle-income people buy housing, which said that, starting in May, the monthly mortgage on their home will be increased to more than 100% of the family income.

Who is responsible? "There is a proconsul here, as you know, a Mr. Deane Hinton, the U.S. ambassador," says Calvo. "He is the one who gives the orders."