

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. government drug-dealing covered up

Hoeverler ruled references to U.S. government drug running "irrelevant"; fellow judge found practices "obscene."

Federal District Judge William Hoeverler continues to run cover for U.S. government drug-running, in the Miami trial of Panamanian leader Gen. Manuel Noriega. Despite multiple prosecution objections—"virtually all" of which were sustained by Hoeverler, the Oct. 2 *Washington Post* reported—defense lawyer Frank Rubino got the government's so-called star witness, convicted drug pilot Floyd Carlton Carceres, to admit that while smuggling cocaine for the Medellín Cartel in 1983-84, pilots employed by him were also flying weapons to the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan Contras.

One of those pilots was Teófilo Watson, who died when his plane crashed while flying for the drug cartel. The crash occurred at the Costa Rica ranch of John Hull, who took the shipment and bulldozed the plane into the river, according to court documents. Hull was the liaison between the Contras and the U.S. government. His ranch was a center for the U.S. government illegal Contra resupply effort, which became public March 3, 1984 when seven men aboard a U.S. DC-3 making a delivery to the Contras, died when they crashed near the Hull ranch.

Carlton, who was arrested in Costa Rica for drug trafficking, said some of the flights to the Contras were organized by his business associate Alfredo Caballero, convicted with Carlton on cocaine-trafficking charges related to Diacsa, a Miami-based air company. Despite Carlton and Caballero's drug history, Diacsa was twice contracted to deliver "humanitarian aid" to the Contras by the State Department.

The man in charge of those State Department contracts to Diacsa was Elliott Abrams, who pleaded guilty Oct. 7 to two misdemeanor counts of lying to Congress about his involvement in the Contra operations. Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs during the Reagan-Bush administrations, was one of the architects of the U.S. Contra policy run by Oliver North. Abrams was also one of the chiefs of the operation to "get" Noriega because of the Panamanian leader's opposition to the U.S. drugs-for-arms operations in Central and South America.

When Rubino sought to question Carlton as to whether the pilots were taking the weapons down to Central America on the same flights on which they brought the cartel's drugs into the United States, Hoeverler ruled it "irrelevant." When Rubino asked Carlton if these flights were ordered by National Security Council staffer Oliver North, Hoeverler "grew increasingly testy," according to the *Post*. "Just stay away from it," he snapped at Rubino.

According to the defense, "senior U.S. policymakers" thought the idea of using "drug money was a perfect solution to the Contras' funding problems," and North "suggested to the DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] in June 1985 that \$1.5 million in drug money carried aboard a plane piloted by DEA informant Barry Seal . . . be provided to the Contras."

Similarly, when defense attorneys earlier cross-examined Luis del Cid, a former lieutenant colonel in the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) who

became a prosecution witness in a plea-bargain agreement, Hoeverler ruled the relationship between the PDF, the CIA, and the Israeli Mossad as "irrelevant." Del Cid had testified that he had received security training in Israel. Hoeverler also stopped Noriega's attorneys from asking Del Cid about a 1983 photo of Vice President Bush with Noriega, and prevented the photo being shown to the jury.

Hoeverler also barred the defense from introducing the transcript of a telephone conversation during which, according to Rubino, Carlton said he would "get even" with Noriega because the latter had confiscated one of his airplanes used to smuggle drugs and throw him in jail.

The defense is also asking Hoeverler to dismiss the case because of the latest prosecution outrage. Despite an order issued by Hoeverler at the request of Noriega's lawyers, a secret list of defense witnesses was given to the prosecution and leaked to the media, which reported Oct. 3 that North was being subpoenaed. The list was provided to the State Department by Lewis Tambs, U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica at the height of the illegal Contra resupply operation in the mid-1980s. The State Department then gave the list to the Department of Justice. Earlier, it was revealed that a member of Noriega's defense team, lawyer Ray Takiff, was a government informant.

The government's buying of witnesses caused U.S. District Judge Scott O. Wright to publicly express his distaste. "I mean, they're cutting deals down there that are obscene," he said Oct. 2 about the plea-bargaining in the Noriega trial. For example, the government dropped drug charges against Carlton that could have meant a life sentence plus 145 years in jail; it let him keep his drug earnings, and paid him at least \$211,000 to testify against Noriega.