

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Noriega prosecution is lying again

The truth is: The Panamanian leader gave "unrestricted and unswerving support" to the U.S. war on drugs.

The U.S. government lied in its 1988 indictment of Gen. Manuel Noriega, saying that the Panamanian leader took an unscheduled trip to Cuba in 1984 allegedly to ask Fidel Castro to mediate a dispute with the Medellín Cartel about a cocaine laboratory that was destroyed by the Noriega-led Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). According to testimony at General Noriega's federal drug trial in Miami, far from being an emergency, the trip to Cuba was undertaken with the advance knowledge, the encouragement, and the collaboration of the U.S. government.

"The CIA knew well in advance that the general had received an invitation to Cuba," said defense attorney Frank Rubino.

Donald Winters, CIA senior agent in Panama during the period, testified that on June 12, 1984—fully two weeks before the alleged dispute with the cartel—Noriega told Winters he had received an invitation to Havana. "Fidel Castro was eager to discuss with General Noriega the situation that existed at that time in Central America, especially in Nicaragua and El Salvador," Winters testified March 2.

U.S. intelligence agencies "appreciated and encouraged" Noriega's contacts with the Cubans and prepared a briefing paper for him to take to the meeting with Castro. Since the United States had no diplomatic ties with Cuba, Winters testified, "We viewed this as an opportunity to bring certain things to his [Castro's] attention."

On Aug. 1, CIA director William

Casey and another high CIA official traveled to Panama, where Noriega briefed them on his talks with Castro, said Winters. Noriega helped the U.S. with Castro on several occasions, including one time when he arranged the release of detained American crewmen, he said.

By way of damage control, following Winters's testimony prosecutors rushed to stipulate that Noriega had cooperated, by allowing the CIA to use its "eavesdropping" installations in Panama to fight drugs. "He encouraged us to use this capability in the investigation of drug trafficking," prosecutors admitted, thus preventing the defense from questioning other CIA officials.

Earlier, the jury heard the testimony of three Panamanian PDF military officers taken prisoner during the 1989 American invasion: Maj. Cleto Hernández, a Swiss-trained, former child psychologist who served as PDF intelligence chief; Maj. Nivaldo Madriñán who ran the investigative police branch; and Lucino Miranda, chief of narcotics interdiction. Their testimony was videotaped at Panama's Modelo Prison, where all three have been held, without trial, since the U.S. invasion, under nominal custody of the Panamanian government.

In sharp contrast with the convicted drug traffickers, kidnapers, and murderers, whose sentences were shortened or who were paid millions of dollars to testify against Noriega, the three defense witnesses received nothing. On the contrary, "Panama's current civilian government is perse-

cuting those witnesses and a fourth former military official whose testimony [defense attorneys] regard as essential," the *New York Times* reported March 1. An official at the Panamanian Embassy in Washington was quoted openly threatening to prosecute the witnesses.

Nonetheless, the three forcefully denied that Noriega engaged in any illegal drug activity. Major Madriñán testified that Noriega "gave his unrestricted and unswerving support" to the U.S. fight against drugs. He showed a key prosecution contention—that the Colombian cartels paid a \$4.5 million bribe to Noriega to protect one cocaine-processing lab in Panama's jungle province of Darién and another one in Tranquilandia, Colombia—to be a lie. Not only did Noriega order the Darién lab destroyed, but he also gave the DEA crucial information that allowed Tranquilandia to be shut down.

As our readers know, the bribe was paid to Julián Melo, whom Noriega cashiered from the PDF in 1984, when the latter ordered the lab destroyed. Melo, who now walks the streets of Panama a free man, indicated the money was intended, not for Noriega, but for the previous PDF commander, Gen. Rubén Darío Paredes, a protégé of Henry Kissinger. Not surprisingly, prosecutors have refused to offer Melo immunity for his testimony.

The government was also embarrassed by the testimony of Adm. Daniel Murphy (ret.), former head of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction Service, who testified on Feb. 19 that Noriega's cooperation allowed the U.S. to seize 63 drug ships and tons of drugs. "The Panamanian government cooperated in all our requests to board Panamanian vessels on the high seas that were suspected of carrying illegal drugs," Murphy testified.