

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Coming apart at the seams

With no popular support and all-out war among the mafias that comprise it, how long can the Endara government last?

The U.S.-installed government of Guillermo Endara appears to be on the verge of self-destruction. The different factions of the mafias that make up the ruling coalition have been going at each other tooth and nail, while the vast majority of the population has turned its back on the regime. The country has become even more ungovernable since the Nov. 15 plebiscite, when the electorate overwhelmingly refused to erase the right to an army from the country's Constitution, as demanded by the United States and the regime George Bush put in power with the 1989 invasion.

Workers at the Social Security administration, which runs most of the country's hospitals and clinics, as well as the pension system, have been striking for most of November. Employees at the National University have been on strike several weeks. Xiomara Ambulo, leader of the union that represents the university workers, accused the Endara regime of corruption, according to the Nov. 20 issue of *La Estrella de Panamá*. Everybody knows that the President and his ministers "are always appointing their mistresses and relatives to key jobs, to the detriment of low-paid public employees who are getting hunger wages," said Ambulo.

The strike wave was joined on Nov. 18 by the postal workers. Postmaster Venus Cárdenas announced that people from the ranks of the 35-40% who are unemployed would be hired as strike breakers. Thousands showed up, only to be told that the government could not handle their job applications. Riots broke out in several parts of the country

and police had to be called in to put down the disturbances.

The Endara government, which is now facing the wrath of the strikers as well as the unemployed, appeared on the verge of adding to its list of enemies when Cárdenas announced that employees from another government agency, Digedecom, would be used to replace the strikers. All these job actions will pale in comparison if the employees of the government-owned national power company, IRHE, make good on their threat to strike for back pay and to protest government plans to privatize the agency.

"The middle class has been pauperized," said a source. "Not even with two salaries can one cover basic needs. There is just no government."

Before Bush sent in the troops, ostensibly to fight drugs, there was no serious drug consumption in Panama. Now, "Panama has the worst drug problem in all of Latin America and the Caribbean," according to a study by the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), reported *El Nuevo Herald*, the Spanish edition of the *Miami Herald*, on Nov. 20. Before the invasion, a gram of cocaine sold for \$50; now it goes for \$5. Crack cocaine, virtually unknown before the U.S. invasion of December 1989, can be obtained on virtually any street corner for 35-50¢ a dose, less than a pint of beer. Everyone is affected, according to *El Herald*; patients at one treatment center include a surgeon, a dentist, and a lawyer.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Gabriel Taboada, one of the key witnesses that the U.S. government used

against Gen. Manuel Noriega, is threatening to retract his testimony because the government has not given him the promised payoff, according to the Nov. 20 *El Nuevo Herald*. "I will testify that what I said was not true," said Taboada, a convicted drug trafficker who was used by the United States to testify that he saw Noriega meeting with drug cartel leaders in Medellín, Colombia, a city that Noriega's attorneys say the general never visited in his life. Taboada said prosecutors were supposed to get him out of jail, where he is serving a 20-year drug-trafficking sentence, but that hasn't yet happened.

The drug bankers whom Bush installed in power are openly accusing each other of incompetence and corruption. Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderón was recently accused by Comptroller General Rubén Darío Carles of "collecting a paycheck for not working," a reference to the fact that he continues to unlawfully draw a salary plus expenses, although he left the government months ago.

Attorney General Rogelio Cruz, a former drug banker himself, was recently rebuked by his former drug-banking partner, Supreme Court Chief Justice Carlos Lucas López, for releasing millions of dollars in accounts seized in suspected cases of drug trafficking. Cruz is also engaged in a running dispute with another former drug-banking partner, Treasury Minister Mario Galindo, over Cruz's attempts to have the head of Customs, Rodrigo Arosemena, fired for abetting smuggling. In turn, Carles and Galindo, both former employees of Chase Manhattan Bank, are engaged in a factional scuffle within their own Moliarena party with Panama's Second Vice President Guillermo "Billy" Ford, formerly a co-owner of the drug money-laundering Dadeland Bank of Miami.