

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Drugs and democracy with a salsa beat

Is salsa king Rúben Blades being promoted to the presidency of U.S.-occupied Panama to make it safe for narco-democracy?

As the U.S. government starves the people of Haiti and moves to invade that nation and reestablish the genocidal necklacer Jean-Bertrand "Papa" Aristide back in power, it is worth reviewing what's going on in Panama, where Washington's idea of democracy equals drugs.

U.S. authorities now admit that the tons of cocaine and the piles of drug money now going through Panama far exceed anything that supposedly took place under Gen. Manuel Noriega. A quick glance at recent history reveals the enormity of the drug trade being carried out by the U.S.-imposed government. It is this narco-democracy that a possible future presidency of salsa king Rúben Blades is intended to protect.

On Oct. 22, legislator Anel Ramírez, a member of the opposition PALA party, was arraigned in Tampa, Florida on charges of attempting to smuggle 150 kilos of Colombian cocaine into the United States. Ramírez was carrying \$300,000 in alleged government money to pay for the drugs, and another \$1 million in negotiable instruments.

On Sept. 1, U.S. authorities in Miami discovered over five tons of cocaine in a shipment of Panamanian coffee from the influential Gil family.

In mid-1992, another five tons of cocaine were seized on the premises of Celeste International, a company tied to cocaine kingpins Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela and his brother Miguel, of the Colombian Cali Cartel. Celeste's premises, by the way, were located in Panama's Free Trade Zone in Colón, a mini-version of what the Americas can look forward to if the

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is rammed through the U.S. Congress. According to the Sept. 20 *Washington Post*, of the estimated \$9 billion that changes hands every year in the Free Trade Zone, some \$2 billion is in cash, and no one knows how much of that "is cocaine money washing into the international banking system."

This month, drug traffickers Salvador Magluta and Augusto Falcón are to go on trial in Florida for smuggling one ton of cocaine per month into Miami for over a decade! U.S. puppet Panamanian President Guillermo Endara was a key officer of at least six of the companies set up for Magluta and Falcón to launder their billions of narco-dollars. Also on the board of directors of the companies were Endara's law partners Menalco Solís, who now runs the state security agency set up by the CIA since the 1989 invasion, and Hernán Delgado, Endara's chief presidential adviser.

Despite the billions of drug dollars, living standards have dropped precipitously. An estimated 50% of Panamanians now live below the poverty line.

The Endara regime also cancelled the November celebrations of the founding of Panama, because of an expected dengue epidemic, which could be prevented if a mere \$22 million were spent for insecticides. This in a country where mosquito eradication and other public health measures were pioneered.

A desperate population is being told that their best hope lies in the campaign now under way for next May's presidential elections. If the

polls are correct, Blades the salsa king is leading the pack. Despite his carefully constructed image as the man of the people, Blades and his "Papa Egoro" ("Mother Earth," in the Ngobe Indian dialect) party are a long-standing operation of the same "Project Democracy" crowd that is backing Haiti's Aristide.

Having achieved his first pop hit with a Latin-beat version of "Mack the Knife," from the *Three Penny Opera* by the Nazi-Communist Frankfurt School's Kurt Weil, Blades was groomed for the presidency by being put through Harvard University. His prominence was ensured by featuring him in movies alongside such Hollywood stars as Robert Redford and Joe Pesci, while the requisite leftist intellectual credentials were provided by having him sing the poems of the pronarco Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, at the Kennedy Center, a few blocks from the White House.

Behind Blades's campaign is the openly pro-drug legalization Inter-American Dialogue, in the person of one of the disciples of Xabier Gorostiaga. A Basque-born Jesuit priest, Gorostiaga started as a rabid anti-communist, but later became an economic adviser to Nicaragua's Sandinistas and is now an all-out promoter of British free-trade liberalism, which the Dialogue advocates. As for Blades, his key platform planks include keeping the U.S. military bases in Panama past the year 2000, when they are supposed to shut down, according to the Carter-Torrijos canal treaties, and giving salsa concerts along with carrying out his presidential duties. "Since ancient Greece, the best leaders of a country have been those who have an artistic sensitivity." Salsa and politics "can be harmonized," AFP reported the crooner saying.