

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

Project Democracy devours offspring

The puppet government is being deserted in droves by its former supporters, including the U.S.

Panama's Bishops' Conference issued a scathing attack against the U.S.-installed ruling troika of President Guillermo Endara and his two vice presidents, Ricardo Arias Calderón and Guillermo "Billy" Ford. "There is a lack of leadership and definition on the part of the government," said the bishops in a Pastoral Letter issued Aug. 2.

They criticized the government for leaving too much in the hands of "private enterprise and civic clubs, as if the government has abandoned its duties of looking out for the common good, by providing encouragement, leadership, and coordination to national life." They charged that the administration of justice is slow, and chastised the factions that make up the ruling coalition for their "thirst for revenge" against members of the former government of Gen. Manuel Noriega and for being more concerned with getting a share of the spoils than promoting the good of Panama.

But the bishops reserved their most pointed barbs for the U.S. government, which brought the current Panamanian regime to power with the invasion of last Dec. 20. President Bush, who is condemning Iraq for its invasion and occupation of a smaller nation, Kuwait, would do well to study the Panamanian bishops' letter before jumping on Saddam Hussein.

The U.S. military continues its forcible occupation of Panama, the bishops said, implying that it is covetous of Panamanian territory. The churchmen added that key decisions about Panama's internal affairs are made in Washington.

"Panama demands that the gov-

ernment of the United States respect the integrity of its territory, in accordance with the basic principles of international law," they said. They demanded "that the Panamanian state must be autonomous respecting its government policy decisions," and added that "the American military presence outside of the areas allowed by the canal treaties, cannot be justified."

The Bush government has shown its "insensitivity to the pain of the people" by being "late and providing too little" economic aid to rebuild Panama, say the bishops, who add that they back "the right to compensation to which the families of those killed in the invasion are entitled."

The bishops' attack is all the more remarkable since Panama's Catholic Primate, Archbishop Marcos McGrath, last December had welcomed the U.S. invasion as an act of "liberation." McGrath, a member of the Inter-American Dialogue, an organization that has been working on behalf of drug legalization, had also mobilized against General Noriega. The new line reflects pressures brought to bear upon McGrath by fellow bishops (and, say some, by Rome itself), and disillusionment with the puppet government among its erstwhile supporters because it is so ineffective.

Also, the gang that brought the Endara troika to power, the U.S. secret government apparatus known as Project Democracy, is working to undermine its own creation. Similar to its actions against Cory Aquino in the Philippines and the Violeta Chamorro government in Nicaragua, two other governments it helped bring to power,

Project Democracy has been conducting a massive campaign to discredit the Endara government.

This is in keeping with its philosophy of "supporting the opposition until they become the government, and then supporting their opposition" in an unending cycle, as one of its agents, William Paddock, once told a journalist. This prevents a strong government from consolidating itself and ensures permanent U.S. control over Panama.

One who has been deployed for this purpose is Miguel Antonio Bernal, a French-trained lawyer and journalist who worked with Project Democracy to discredit Noriega. Bernal, for whom the U.S. arranged a fellowship and teaching post in the U.S. last year after he slandered Noriega one time too many, returned to Panama a few weeks ago to take up the same role against Endara. The "presidency . . . is influence-peddling," he claimed, saying that Endara was covering up for people who robbed the nation.

Endara sued Bernal for slander. But others were publicly backing Bernal's charges that Endara's law partner and key adviser, Hernán Delgado, was peddling influence through the presidency. Worse, according to an open letter from a member of Endara's own Panamanian Party, his partner Delgado was accused of having been, together with current Attorney General Rogelio Cruz, "the legal representatives of First Interamericas Bank, which was shut down for money laundering."

Alberto Conte, the leader of the Civic Crusade, the group that ran the street demonstrations against Noriega with funds provided by Project Democracy's public coordinating body, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, announced on July 30 that his group will have to "take other actions" against the Endara government.