

Holocaust in Panama returns to haunt Bush

by Carlos Wesley

CBS News' "60 Minutes" program provided graphic evidence on Sept. 30 that thousands of Panamanian civilians were indiscriminately massacred by George Bush's invading army during the invasion of Panama last Dec. 20. The CBS program was the second time in two days that Bush was taken to task for the holocaust he wrought in Panama.

In a speech on the floor of the House on Sept. 28, Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D-Tex.) scored the administration for its hypocrisy in condemning Saddam Hussein for his actions in the Mideast after the U.S. "incinerated" several thousand old men, women, and children in Panama without giving "a hoot for them." Gonzalez accused Bush of being responsible for "war crimes" and of using "Hitlerian tactics" in Panama.

Bush is facing increasing heat for the Panama massacre at a time of growing resistance to his committing the U.S. to a similar bloodbath against Iraq. The President is also in deep trouble because of the nation's economic and budget crisis.

EIR founding editor Lyndon LaRouche had warned that the President would find himself precisely in the situation he is currently facing. Hours after Bush invaded Panama, LaRouche issued a statement charging that the massacre in Panama was an action carried out in "the spirit of Tiananmen Square" and that it would eventually cause a political backfire that "will lead in all probability to Mr. George Bush's resignation from office" before completing his term, *EIR* reported Jan. 5, 1990.

Alone among American media, *EIR* has consistently reported on the magnitude of the Panama massacre from the beginning of the invasion. As early as Jan. 5 *EIR* reported, "In all, 5,000 to 7,000 Panamanians, mostly civilians, died during the invasion."

Secret mass graves

Veteran CBS correspondent Mike Wallace opened the "60 Minutes" segment on the Panama massacre by noting that Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Michael Dugan was re-

cently fired after he spoke about bombing downtown Baghdad, Iraq. "Governments are not supposed to wage war on civilians," said Wallace.

"But if civilian casualties are an issue in the war that the U.S. seems to be edging closer to in the Middle East, perhaps it's a good time to take a hard look at what happened to civilians the last time the United States went to war: the invasion of Panama—Operation Just Cause," when, said Wallace, "Many Panamanian civilians, good friends of the United States, were gunned down or caught in the crossfire as U.S. forces went after the scalp of Gen. Manuel Noriega." The U.S. official figure is 202 Panamanian civilians killed, said Wallace, but "when you go to Panama you find that figure hard to believe."

"How in the world was the U.S. Army able to hide the number of civilian deaths in a country with a population of only two million people? One way was to bury bodies secretly in mass graves," said Wallace. The cameras showed a soldier stopping a reporter from filming a mass burial site. Despite government efforts at a coverup, some details leaked out, said Wallace. "For example, reporters found that more than 100 bodies were buried at the Jardin de Paz, the Garden of Peace Cemetery in Panama City."

Thousands of Panamanians who have been looking for the bodies of their loved ones since the invasion have been unable to find them. "Finally, Isabel Corro was able to raise more than \$25,000 in private donations that she used to conduct two exhumations. The bulldozers began to open the mass graves at the Jardin de Paz" in late April.

The cameras then showed survivors searching for their relatives among the decomposed bodies, and scores of body bags being disinterred and transferred to coffins for a proper burial. According to reporter Mike Wallace, the exhumations and identifications continued for eight days amidst the horrible stench of death. Among the bodies, Isabel Corro, who heads the survivors' organization, found that of her own

father. But “many people who came to find their missing relatives left the cemetery disappointed. They are still searching,” said Wallace. Some of the few who did find their missing family members “had to go into the pits five or six times to look at what was left of the bodies after five months in the ground” in a hot, humid, tropical country.

Neither the U.S. nor the government it installed in Panama helped the people in any way during the days they were searching the mass graves. “And while there are at least six or seven more mass graves,” said Wallace, the leader of the survivors’ group, Isabel Corro, “has run out of money to continue.”

Bush lied

One of the most telling moments in the “60 Minutes” broadcast was when Bush was shown telling the American people on the day of the invasion that “the way we went after some of these targets was to minimize civilian casualties.” According to Bush: “a lot of [American] kids risked their lives going in at night” to avoid harm to civilians. But, Bush did not tell the truth.

CBS presented graphic proof that there was no demonstrable concern about minimizing the killing of civilians. Instead “the massive firepower” employed in “the largest, most powerful U.S. military offensive since the Vietnam War” was used without any consideration of the harm that would be done to innocent people.

The cameras showed the slum neighborhood where the headquarters of Panama’s Defense Forces were located, El Chorrillo, going up in flames as a result of the U.S. bombardment. “Twenty-five thousand people lived there, and they were asleep in their beds when the world around them began to incinerate,” the CBS program reported.

“When the sun came up on the morning after that grisly night before, El Chorrillo was still burning out of control, and reports had already begun to circulate that hundreds of civilians had been killed and thousands wounded in El Chorrillo alone. When the fires finally burned themselves out, El Chorrillo had ceased to exist,” said Wallace, as the cameras showed what used to be a vibrant community reduced to smoldering ashes.

Is the Bush administration aware that the number of civilian victims is in the thousands, rather than the few handful of deaths it officially admits to?

The answer is yes, according to a copy of an official Army document shown summarizing a report from an Army casualty officer nine days after the invasion had begun: “Estimate of 1,000 civilians killed is about right. . . . Some were killed in the El Chorrillo section of Panama, where about 10 blocks of high-density housing or slums were destroyed as a result of *our ops* [emphasis added],” states the secret Army report.

The CBS reporter interviewed former U.S. Army Ranger John Kiyonaga and his brother, David Kiyonaga, American

attorneys who have lived for many years in Panama where their father was the CIA station chief. They, and another American attorney, Michael Pierce, are representing some of the victims who are seeking compensation. But the U.S., which paid compensation to the victims of American invasions in the Dominican Republic and Grenada, is refusing to do so in Panama.

According to an official Department of Defense document, a program to indemnify the victims similar to that instituted in Grenada “would not be in the best interest of the Department of Defense of the U.S. because of the potentially huge numbers of such claims.” As David Kiyonaga said on the show, “If you have a claims program, then all of the claims will come out of the woodwork, and then you’ll see exactly how costly this invasion was in terms of human life. And our government doesn’t want to grapple with that. . . . [The invasion] was great public relations, it was great for the President. We did a good military action, everybody loved it.”

Before the invasion, the people of Panama were very pro-American. Since the massacre, said Wallace, “if anything, anti-U.S. sentiment is growing every day.” Film of a recent demonstration to protest U.S. policy was shown on the program, and thousands of marchers could be seen—estimates were 10,000 people—carrying anti-American slogans, “and signs of ‘Yankee, go home,’ are being spray-painted all over Panama.”

The U.S. occupation continues

Representative Gonzalez made the same point on the floor of the House on Sept. 28. “I will tell you my colleagues, we still have our troops governing and running Panama. We dare not pull them out, I will tell you, because no American will be safe at the moment we remove our troops.” Gonzalez ridiculed the notion that the U.S. invaded Panama to restore democracy, noting that the man the U.S. installed as president of Panama, Guillermo “Porky” Endara, was sworn in “at the time of the invasion at our military post and base, so we could hardly say that he was elected.”

Gonzalez scored the administration for its hypocritical behavior toward Iraq, “when we invaded Panama, and committed atrocities such as firebombing highly incendiary wooden structures that had been built for the black workers that were imported in 1908 to construct the Panama Canal.

“We killed more than 1,000 or 2,000 or 3,000, incinerated them. They were all black or mulatto. Who has given a hoot for them? Who has given a hoot for the hundreds of children who are blind, armless, old men and women in Panama?” Gonzalez asked.

“As far as I know, nobody. Would that not have been called Hitlerian tactics? Would that not have been called war crimes?” he asked. The lawmaker said that because of his behavior towards Panama, George Bush has no “moral right” to attack Iraq.