

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

The railroading of General Noriega

Why is George Bush trying to rush the anti-drug Panamanian leader to judgment without a proper defense?

The U.S. government has induced the drug-tainted government it installed in Panama by military force early this year, to bring a \$6.5 billion civil suit against Gen. Manuel Noriega under the U.S. Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) laws. The suit, brought in a Miami, Florida federal court, claims that Noriega ran the now-extinct Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), as a racketeering enterprise. Noriega was the commander of the PDF until he was overthrown by the U.S. invasion of Panama which began last Dec. 20.

The immediate effect of the lawsuit was the freezing of Noriega's personal bank accounts, an action which prevents him from paying his legal expenses. He is now in danger of being denied his constitutional right to a lawyer of his choice, and he may have to go to trial with only a court-appointed public defender, to face the full might of the U.S. government and its corrupt Justice Department.

The lawsuit negated an earlier agreement reached by the prosecutors with Judge William Hoeveller and Noriega's defense attorneys, to release up to \$6 million of Noriega's own money for his legal fees. By getting Panama's puppet regime to file the suit, the prosecutors took back what they were forced to concede earlier. Only this time they can claim they are not legally responsible for tying up the funds.

Because of Noriega's financial problems, Judge Hoeveller said that the trial will have to be postponed for several months.

Meanwhile, the administration of

former Central Intelligence Agency head George Bush, has stymied defense efforts to investigate U.S. covert activities. "The CIA would prefer this case not be tried," Cable News Network reported Nov. 1.

This case is not about drugs, said Frank Rubino, Noriega's lawyer. It is "a complex case that evolved out of the long and often secret relationship between Noriega and the U.S." he said, according to the Oct. 26 *New York Times*.

"It is to the government's advantage to give us no money so we can't investigate," he explained. "They don't want us to. This is a Pandora's box."

The RICO suit against Noriega was filed on behalf of the government of Guillermo ("Porky") Endara, by Gregory Craig of Williams and Connolly, the same law firm whose partner Brendan Sullivan, represented Iran-Contra figure Oliver North. Craig's relationship with the CIA goes back at least to the 1960s. In 1967, he was influential in the National Student Association, an organization that was a conduit for CIA funding.

Craig was also one of the organizers of the financial warfare waged by the United States against Panama to force Noriega's removal. In February 1990, Craig arranged to have thrown out of a U.S. federal court a drug-trafficking case against Endara's business partner, Panamanian millionaire Carlos Eleta, who had been arrested in Georgia on charges of conspiring to smuggle 600 kilos of cocaine per month into the United States. At the time of his arrest last year, Eleta was

working for the CIA as a bagman, delivering funds for Endara's 1989 presidential campaign and for other anti-Noriega activities.

To create the environment for a successful railroad of Noriega, a new wave of media slanders has been set off against the former Panamanian leader. The word being spread all over the world is that Noriega is being held in prison facilities that are a "country club, with color television, exercise bike, computers, paper shredders, and two safes." The campaign is also obviously aimed at removing Noriega from a secure environment to facilitate an attempt against his life.

In fact, Noriega "experiences much greater restriction than other inmates," noted J. Michael Quinlan, director of the Bureau of Prisons. The conditions under which Noriega is being held "represent a balance between the unique security needs that he presents as an individual, his treatment as a prisoner of war, and the need to protect sensitive national security information to which he and his legal team may need to have access in the preparation of his case for trial," said Quinlan in a letter published by the *Miami Herald* Oct. 30.

As for Noriega's "exercise bicycle," he said, it was put together "from salvaged parts."

The story that Noriega was being held in a "posh" jail cell began to be retailed right after the Oct. 23 *Baltimore Sun* revealed that the Bush administration "knew" that Endara's Banco Interoceanico, also known as Interbanco, had "ties to the Colombian cartels since 1984, but chose to ignore them in its efforts to oust General Noriega."

"Instead," reported the *Sun*, "the U.S. helped finance Mr. Endara's 1989 presidential campaign" despite his bank's well-known links to the cocaine cartels.