

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

U.S. covers for the real traffickers

This time we agree with Billy Ford: Drug-tainted officials should go. So, when is he leaving?

Although the drug trials of William Saldarriaga and Brian Davidow were severed from that of Panamanian Gen. Manuel Noriega, it is Noriega, not they, who is the target of prosecutors in the trial against the two now under way in Miami.

Prosecutor William Sullivan told the jury that Saldarriaga, Davidow, and others allegedly involved in the case, were told personally by General Noriega that "they had his protection" for a scheme to deliver guns to Colombia's drug mafias, in exchange for a cargo of cocaine that would be smuggled to the U.S. aboard the luxury yacht *Krill* in 1986. But it appears that Noriega's "protection" landed the drug-runners in the soup: The *Krill* was busted in Colombian waters by Colombia's National Police in March 1986, before it could reach the U.S. with its deadly cargo of 304 kilograms of 80% pure cocaine.

To construct its case, the prosecution is offering immunity and reduced sentences to questionable witnesses in exchange for hearsay testimony. Convicted drug trafficker Gabriel Taboada, who is serving an eight-year sentence in Miami, testified that just before the *Krill* was busted in 1986, defendant Saldarriaga and unindicted co-conspirator Ramón Navarro "told me that, yes, that the boat was under protection from Panama by General Noriega." As any Perry Mason aficionado knows, back when there was still the semblance of a functioning U.S. justice system, second-hand testimony such as Taboada's, would have been thrown out as hearsay.

And, don't forget, Noriega's predecessor as head of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Rubén Darío Paredes (ret.) was not indicted either. This, as we reported last week, despite the fact that the prosecution admits that Paredes was part of the plot to exchange guns for cocaine with the Medellín Cartel, the *Washington Post* reported on Feb. 28. Moreover, it was Paredes who sold the *Krill* to the alleged traffickers, who included two of his sons. One, Amet, has pleaded guilty and is now a prosecution witness. The other, Rubén Darío Paredes, Jr. was killed by the cartels in 1986 for his failure to pay up for the lost *Krill* shipment.

Paredes excused his late son as being "an adventurer like any 25 year old. He paid dearly for his lack of experience. . . . He did not deserve this end." Just days before his son's mutilated body was found in Medellín, Colombia, General Paredes publicly proclaimed that the drug mafias were not involved. The Ochoa family, kingpins of the Medellín Cartel, "have given me their word," said Paredes, according to the March 25, 1986 *La Es-trella de Panamá*.

So why is Noriega, and not Paredes, on trial, even though Paredes appears to be the Panamanian drug general? We said it before, but it bears repeating: Paredes was willing to play ball with Henry Kissinger, who put him up for the presidency of Panama in 1984. Noriega refused to play. Instead, Noriega—as was confirmed in an Aug. 31, 1989 speech to the Organization of American States by Law-

rence Eagleburger, former Kissinger Associates president and now deputy secretary of state—blocked Kissinger's bid to make Paredes President, which would have put Panama under top-down control of the drug mob.

While Noriega is being railroaded in Miami, the Kissinger-controlled White House has put the drug traffickers in charge of Panama. Confirming what *EIR* has reported for a number of years, the Panamanian daily *El Siglo* reported on Feb. 27 that the U.S.-installed Attorney General of Panama Rogelio Cruz has maintained a relationship with Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, kingpin of Colombia's Cali cocaine cartel, "since 1984 when he [Cruz] was executive secretary of First Interamericas Bank." Held through cutouts as a joint money-laundering venture of both the Cali and Medellín cartels the bank was shut down by Noriega.

Besides Cruz, others on the board of First Interamericas included Jaime Arias Calderón, whose brother is Ricardo Arias Calderón, first vice president of Panama since the U.S. installed the government after its December 1989 invasion.

Guillermo ("Billy") Ford, the second vice president of Panama, said that "any government official, no matter what his rank . . . should reply with clarity and straightforwardness to the Panamanian people; otherwise, he should resign."

It is not often that this writer finds himself in agreement with Billy Ford, but this time Ford is right. Cruz and all other officials involved in drug banking, including President Guillermo Endara, Supreme Court Chief Justice Carlos Lucas López, and most members of the cabinet should go. In fact, since the shoe fits Ford, given his long involvement in drug-money laundering, he should do the right thing and tender his resignation.