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Former Panamanian Dictator Manuel Noriega Apologizes for Human Rights Violations

by Louisa Reynolds
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Panama’s former dictator Manuel Noriega (1983-1989) apologized on national television for human rights violations committed under his regime. In his first interview since 1996, Noriega told Panamanian TV station Telemetro on June 24, "I am asking forgiveness from all the people who were offended, affected, hurt, or humiliated by my actions or those of my superiors in compliance with orders or those of my subordinates." He added that he wanted to "close the cycle of the military era."

Noriega, a Panamanian Army officer who became one of the CIA’s most valued intelligence sources as well as a conduit for illicit weapons destined for US backed counterinsurgency forces (NotiCen, April 14, 1989), was removed from power in 1989 during a US military invasion (NotiCen, Dec. 20, 1989).

He was subsequently taken to the US and convicted of drug trafficking and racketeering charges in 1992. Noriega served a prison sentence in the US until 2010 when he was extradited to France to serve time for money-laundering charges. A year later, he was extradited to Panama (NotiCen, Dec. 8, 2011, and Jan. 26, 2012).

Noriega, 81, is currently serving three 20-year prison sentences for the disappearance of two opponents in the 1980s, Hugo Spadafora and Moisés Giroldi (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 1989), and the Allbrook massacre, a crackdown on soldiers who staged a failed uprising against him.

The day after Noriega appeared on Telemetro, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela urged the nation to accept his apology. "He asked forgiveness, and I believe as a Christian that all of us must forgive. The Panamanian people have already overcome that period of dictatorship," he said.

In December 2014, on the 25th anniversary of the US invasion, Varela announced a "national reconciliation" process to heal the wounds left by the military intervention that deposed Noriega and left at least 500 people dead.

Archbishop José Domingo Ulloa made a similar statement and said that forgiving Noriega would help the nation "turn the page."

Victims’ families find apology unconvincing

Victims’ families, however, found Noriega’s apology unconvincing and regard it as a ploy for the former dictator to be placed under house arrest on the grounds that he is elderly and suffers from ill health.

The aging former dictator has suffered several brain hemorrhages and has also been diagnosed with prostate cancer and depression, and his defense attorneys have unsuccessfully tried to argue that he should be placed under house arrest or transferred to a hospital where he can receive adequate treatment.
"I think we Panamanians are surprised and asking ourselves, ‘Why now? What’s his goal?’" Aurelio Barria, a former opponent of Noriega, told Agence France-Presse (AFP). Barria said Noriega’s apology "means something and cannot go unnoticed," but he added, "Panamanians are surprised as to the timing and motive behind his apology."

"He is seeking reconciliation with himself and with Panamanian society, but this doesn’t mean that the pending lawsuits against him should be forgotten," Barria said.

Human rights organizations and victims’ families have also said that the best way for Noriega to express regret and remorse would be for him to reveal crucial information that could help them find the bodies of political opponents who were forcibly disappeared under his regime.

"Before asking forgiveness, he should speak up and tell us everything that happened. I feel he has other interests, like being granted house arrest," Maritza Maestre, the coordinator of a committee for victims’ families, told the AFP.

Maestre was also critical of Varela’s remarks and accused him of "legitimizing impunity." She also called for a commission set up in 2010 to identify political opponents, who were disappeared under the Noriega regime and whose remains were found in the Panamanian Guardia Nacional base in 2000, to be reinstated (NotiCen, Oct. 21, 1999, and Jan. 18, 2001).

In 2014, former President Ricardo Martinelli (2009-2014) promised to bring Argentine forensic anthropologists to help the authorities identify the remains found in military bases. However, to date, the remains have not been identified. Varela, his successor, does not appear to have the political will to make progress on the issue, either.

Family members of the disappeared also demand that human rights violations committed under the Torrijos and Noriega dictatorships should be included in the national curriculum, that families should be compensated, and that a monument should be built in the victims’ memory. None of these demands has been met.

On social media, many Panamanians also expressed skepticism about the motives behind Noriega’s apology. "May God forgive you. The people say: forbidden to forget," tweeted a user identified as wayacol26.

"I just heard Noriega’s statement. It doesn’t mean anything else but what he felt like saying. How arrogant; this is not how you apologize," tweeted Yara Fiengo.

Pending lawsuits
In September 2014, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) decided Noriega should face trial for the disappearance of Luis Antonio Quirós in 1969, when Noriega was the head of Panama’s now defunct Guardia Nacional and the right hand man to then dictator Omar Torrijos (1968-1981). Quirós was accused of deserting the Guardia Nacional and collaborating with guerrilla groups.

The court ruled there was enough evidence to prove Noriega was in the town of Jacú, in the province of Chiriquí, where Quirós was last seen alive, at the time of his disappearance.

A number of witnesses have also stated that Noriega, together with other members of the Guardia Nacional, dragged Quirós out of his home and kidnapped him.
However, last May, a local court controversially suspended the trial of Noriega regarding the disappearance of labor unionist Heliodoro Portugal on the grounds that Panama is not allowed to bring new cases against him under the agreement it reached with France for his extradition in 2011 (NotiCen, June 25, 2015).

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