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Panamanian Government Orders Indefinite Extension Of State Of Emergency

by Deborah Tyroler

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On June 19 Panamanian President Eric Arturo del Valle and his cabinet issued a decree for an indefinite extension of the state of emergency which went into effect June 11. The earlier decree was for a 10-day period; extensions were subject to ratification by the National Assembly. Debate in the assembly began June 20. The pro-government assembly coalition, with 45 of 67 seats, has enough votes to rubber-stamp the order, but not enough to curtail debate. The 22 opposition legislators planned to prolong their speeches past the midnight deadline of the original state of emergency decree. The state of emergency, which suspended constitutional guarantees, including the right to public protest and free expression, and instituted nearly complete censorship of independent news, was imposed after two days of rioting sparked by accusations by retired Col. Roberto Diaz Herrera that Panamanian armed forces chief Gen. Manuel Noriega was involved in murder, corruption and electoral fraud. The emergency order coincided with a three-day fact-finding visit by Sen. Christopher J. Dodd (D-Conn.), chairman of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on western hemisphere affairs. Dodd visited the closed opposition daily LA PRENSA June 19 in what he called a gesture of support for press freedom. The rural home of Bertilo Mejia Ortega, leader of the five Christian Democrats in the National Assembly, was ransacked on the evening of June 19, Mejia said. Intruders destroyed furniture and left Mejia's possessions soaked in gasoline piled in his living room with a boxes of matches on top, apparently as a warning. National university rector Abdiel Adames said classes would resume June 22 after a two-week suspension. (Basic data from PRENSA LATINA, 06/20/87; WASHINGTON POST, 06/21/87)

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