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Deborah Tyroler

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## **Alleged U.S. Offer To Drop Indictments If Noriega Leaves Panama: Summary Of Statements & Qualifiers**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

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Earlier this month, Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega was indicted by two federal grand juries in Florida on racketeering and other drug-related charges. When his case was still under investigation, some US officials had suggested the possibility of dropping the investigation if he stepped down. Feb. 18: Long Island newspaper Newsday reported that Asst. Secretary of State Elliott Abrams and Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle had met secretly in Miami on Feb. 17. The Newsday account quoted a "source with ties to Delvalle" as saying Abrams had offered a possible dismissal of the indictments if Noriega agreed to surrender command of the Panamanian defense forces and go into exile. State Department spokesperson Charles Redman confirmed that Abrams had met Delvalle "to review the current political situation in Panama." Other State Department officials, who asked not to be identified, told the Washington Post on the evening of Feb. 18 that the idea of a deal had been broached by Delvalle in a "theoretical" discussion about whether US law would permit dropping an indictment. The officials said Abrams had reiterated to Delvalle the US view that Panama must come under civilian control. They denied that Abrams said anything that could be regarded as an offer to drop the drug charges if Noriega resigns and leaves the country. Feb. 19: The State Department acknowledged that Abrams told Delvalle on Feb. 17 that US law would permit dropping drug-related charges against Noriega if he and his associates give up power and leave Panama. Redman and other officials insisted that Abrams was only responding to "a theoretically posed question by Delvalle." They said that the Reagan administration has no intention of making any such deal. At a press briefing, Redman said, "We all see the drug problem of tremendous importance to the United States...We have every intention of carrying through the indictments." On Feb. 19, the New York Times quoted a Justice Department spokesman, John K. Russell, as saying that Abrams had notified senior criminal division officials that he "would seek to have the indictment dropped against Noriega if he left the country." According to the Times, Russell said the Justice Department told Abrams it opposed the idea. Redman, responding to the Times article, acknowledged that Abrams had asked the Justice Department for "a legal opinion" in order to answer Delvalle's question and had passed on the information that it technically would be possible to drop an indictment. But Redman added that Russell "had the facts slightly wrong" when he said that Abrams had advocated doing so. (Basic data from several sources, including Washington Post, 02/20/88; New York Times, 02/19/88, 02/20/88)

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