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Anama: Summary Of Developments, April 4-5

by Deborah Tyroler

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April 4: State Department spokesperson Phyllis Oakley told reporters that she had seen press reports of an exchange of correspondence between Noriega and Jesse Jackson. "In our view, a proliferation of channels is a tactic that Noriega likes to use to buy time...We have available channels of communications with Noriega, if and when they are needed. We think it would be best to continue to use these channels exclusively." The Panamanian government convened the opening session of a "national dialogue" on the future of Panama, but none of the invited representatives of the 11-member Bishops' Conference, five opposition parties and National Civic Crusade showed up. Attending were representatives of the country's major unions, peasant organizations, nine political parties, the executive and the armed forces. The government dismissed a US complaint that a police vehicle had tried to halt a car carrying the US Ambassador. Instead, a statement by Rodolfo Chiari de Leon, Minister of Government and Justice, indicated that the police sergeant who was driving the vehicle had acted properly after noticing that "civilians with automatic weapons" were following the ambassador in three cars. "Panama feels obligated to protect the lives and property of its citizens and foreigners, including Americans," he said. Reagan's national security adviser, Lt. Gen. Colin Powell characterized the chase incident involving Ambassador Davis as a "minor harassment."

April 5: The first contingent of the 1,300 US troops arrived in Panama. The Panamanian government characterized them as potential advance force of a US invasion. The Panamanian Health Ministry issued a communique warning citizens on the potential health hazards of intimate association with the new contingents of US troops. The communique said that the soldiers could be AIDS carriers. The Ministry stated that the growing number of US soldiers in Panama constitute not only a threat to national sovereignty and independence, but also a real danger to the health of the Panamanian people. Next, the communique said that studies by the US Center of Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga., demonstrated high rates of AIDS infection among US military personnel. An unnamed senior US official cited by the New York Times suggested that the administration was seeking to destabilize the Panamanian government by whipping up discord within the Defense Forces. "Every effort we can take to foster discontent in the PDF, I can assure you, we are taking. If the PDF, after examining the situation, thinks it would be useful to remove General Noriega, I think that would be a very sound decision for them to take," he said. The official then reportedly denied that the US was promoting a second coup attempt to depose Noriega. On newspaper reports that the CIA had drafted an executive order for Reagan's signature authorizing US funds for covert action to support a coup, the official said: "I never discuss what we might be doing in CIA activities or covert actions." (Basic data from several reports, AP, UPI, AFP, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Washington Post, Prensa Latina)

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