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Former Presidents Carter & Ford To Head Committee To Monitor May 7 Panamanian Presidential Elections

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 31, an adviser to former president Jimmy Carter told reporters that both Carter and counterpart Gerald Ford had agreed to head a committee to monitor the May 7 presidential elections in Panama. Robert Pastor, political science professor at Emory University in Atlanta, Ga., said both Carter and Ford are concerned that possible electoral fraud could lead to widespread violence in Panama during the balloting. He added that a group of Latin American officials would be among those represented on the official committee charged with monitoring the poll. During a conference on Latin America at the Carter Center, Emory University, Secretary of State James Baker met for two hours behind closed doors to discuss the Panamanian question with Carter, Ford, Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, former Costa Rican president Daniel Oduber, and other US and Latin American political figures. An unidentified participant at the meeting told Copley News Service that the Secretary outlined possible policy alternatives for Panama currently under study by the Bush administration. Both Perez and Oduber were involved in the negotiations that led to the 1977 Panama Canal treaties, acting as unofficial mediators between then-President Carter and Panamanian head of state, Gen. Omar Torrijos. Torrijos died in a plane crash in 1981. Perez served a first term as president of Venezuela from 1974-79. Oduber was president of Costa Rica from 1974-78. In February, at the inauguration ceremonies for his second term as president, Perez called for Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega's resignation. In the May 7 presidential elections, an eight-party, pro-government coalition is supporting Carlos Duque, a businessperson who is described as a Noriega associate. An opposition coalition comprised of three parties and several unregistered splinter groups is supporting lawyer Guillermo Endara as its candidate. Earlier this year, Carter, Perez and Oduber each appointed a member to a three-person panel to report on preparations for the elections. Carter's nominee was Ambler Moss, former US ambassador to Panama, who is dean of the graduate School of International Studies at the University of Miami. The panel visited Panama from March 12-16 and released its findings at the conference in Atlanta. In the report, the panel said: "Virtually all sectors (of Panama) agree that the May 7 elections are critical of Panama's future. There is considerable disagreement, however, concerning the likelihood that they will be conducted in a fair manner. If they are not conducted fairly, there is a fear that serious violent unrest may develop." The panel added that "the most serious impediment to the elections securing the acceptance of a large majority of the Panamanians is lack of confidence in the independence and impartiality of the [national] electoral tribunal." According to the opposition, the three magistrates on the tribunal are government loyalists. The panel called for "a significant international observer presence" in Panama May 7 to monitor the voting. On March 30, the Panamanian government announced that it would permit only 30 international observers into the country on election day. Pastor is not pessimistic: "It is not impossible to have free elections on May 7. At this moment, the conclusion is that the results are not predetermined." He stated that he was somewhat encouraged by a recent unsolicited letter from Noriega to Carter in which the general promised that the upcoming elections would be clean. Pastor, who served as the National Security Council's director of Latin American affairs during the Carter administration, noted that the three-member panel was

able to meet freely with the representatives of the military, civilian government and opposition during its recent visit to the country. (Basic data from Copley News Service, 04/01/89)

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