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Panama: Elite Military Unit & 10,000 Militia Volunteers Placed On Alert Until After May 7 Elections

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On April 30, about 10,000 civilian volunteer militia, known as the "dignity battalions," and an elite army battalion declared a "state of alert and vigilance" against US attack and took up positions in the mountains and various strategic locations through the country. Capt. Gonzalo Gonzalez, commander of the 7th Infantry Company, said, "Today we abandon the barracks until after May 7 to go into the mountains and remain on guard against any attempted aggression by the imperialists and their treasonous underlings." Gonzalez said that if "the United States insists on making attempts against the sovereignty of Panama and on meddling in domestic problems, then we will react according to our doctrine and according to what we have been taught by our commander, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega." The 7th Infantry is headquartered in Rio Hato, some 120 km. north of the capital. The unit, known as the "Machos del Monte," is specialized in counterinsurgency. Both regular military and militia members were armed with mortars, rifles and low calibre anti-aircraft weapons. The militia units were formed in March 1988 after the US government imposed economic sanctions against Panama and sent troop reinforcements to its military bases along the Panama Canal. The militia is organized into 20 battalions constituting a brigade. Together with the regular military of 10,000, the defense forces total 20,000, or the number of US personnel stationed in Panama. Benjamin Colamarco, chief of the brigade, said that the opposition challenging the government in the elections has been declared traitors to the country "and therefore punishable for treason." In recent months, the Panamanian government reported that the Southern Command has both increased the number of US troops in Panama, but has also brought in a variety of sophisticated equipment. Unidentified Panamanian legislators quoted by Notimex said that AWACS-3 aircraft, equipped with espionage gear, have been engaged in overflights, a pattern established before the US bombed Libya. On the same day, in a public statement the Southern Command issued new restrictions confining all personnel in Panama to their bases from May 6 to May 8 because of the probability of political demonstrations or disturbances. The Command also said it had installed an information center for use by the international news media during the May 7 elections. The government has forbidden journalists to issue predictions or unofficial results on election day, but the Southern Command said its radio and television stations would provide live coverage. On April 29, Panamanian authorities deported William Alejandro Porath, a Chilean whom the government accused of being a "false journalist" and CIA agent. The pro-government newspaper La Republica reported that Porath had no documents accrediting him to any known news organization. The daily said that since his arrival to Panama on April 13, Porath had conducted some 300 opposition-financed opinion surveys on the elections. La Republica added that the Panamanian government had taken measures against infiltration by US spies whose aim was to spark violence during the elections. (Basic data from AFP, Notimex, 04/30/89)

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