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Panama: Opposition Presidential Candidate Says Government Plans Electoral Fraud, & Will Use Troops To Quell Protests

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On May 2, Guillermo Endara, presidential candidate of the three-party Democratic Opposition Alliance, said that the government is engineering electoral fraud for the May 7 elections, and plans to use troops to crush any resulting protests. In an interview with The San Diego Union, Endara acknowledged that he had no "scientific proof" that cheating is planned. But, enough circumstantial evidence exists, he said, to demonstrate that "there is going to be large-scale fraud on Sunday, followed by militarization of the republic on Monday" to squelch protests. Endara said, "I would be very agreeably surprised if there would be no fraud." He added, "But I would commit the sin of political naivete if I believed that the elections were going to be honest." According to the opposition candidate, the latest public opinion polls commissioned by the opposition show him to be ahead of his main electoral challenger by a margin of more than 2 to 1. In addition, he said, the polls show that a record 91% of Panama's nearly 1.2 million registered voters will cast ballots. The opposition has been calling for a massive voter turnout at the polls to reduce the possibility of fraud. Endara said that if electoral fraud deprives him of the presidency, "the people are going to react. And I will be joining them in the street. I am not going to go into hiding or exile." According to the candidate, the opposition "is unarmed and does not want a civil war," but it is prepared to "suffer the consequences" that could result from massive post-election demonstrations. Asked about government charges that his election campaign is being run by the Bush administration, Endara acknowledged that he has had periodic contact with US officials who have discussed Panamanian politics with him, but that they have never offered him advice. Regarding recent media reports that President Bush authorized $10 million in covert assistance for the opposition, Endara said that "not a cent of the money" has been received by the opposition alliance. In any event, he said, the alliance would have rejected the money if it had been offered. In a separate interview with the Union on the same day, presidential spokesperson Jose Hernandez said it was "totally false and absurd" to suggest that the government was planning electoral fraud. "This is probably the first election in international history where the opposition is crying fraud even before the polls open. The opposition should at least wait until the polls close before they try to invalidate the results of the elections," he said. On May 2, the pro-government press ran front-page headlines asserting that the US was planning a military invasion to prevent the victory of Carlos Duque, presidential candidate for a party coalition which supports the government. Critica declared that "The fight will be fierce, bloody and without quarter," alongside a photograph showing troops distributing automatic rifles to Panamanian citizens "to defend the fatherland." (Basic data from Copley News Service, 05/03/89)

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