5-10-1989

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Panama: Post-election Day Summary Of Events & Statements (may 8-9), Part 3

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Category/Department: General
Published: Wednesday, May 10, 1989

May 8: During a brief press conference at the COLINA office at midnight, Duque said the party's margin of victory was "decisive." He attributed his belief in victory to preliminary results of the election compiled by the PRD, and to a detailed and extensive poll conducted by Gallup de Espana between 9 p.m. and midnight Sunday. The poll, he said, showed he had received 50.9% of the vote, compared to 44.7% for Endara. Sixteen hours after polls closed, the official tabulation board said it had not received a single vote to count. Opposition spokespersons said soldiers seized vote tallies at gunpoint from precinct workers throughout the country on Sunday night, and shots were fired in at least two instances when opposition members objected. There were no reports of injuries. Witnesses, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AP that final tallies of precinct votes were seized by soldiers in Panama City, its suburb of San Miguelito and the Atlantic port city of Colon. Witnesses reported similar thefts elsewhere, but the extent of this phenomenon was uncertain. The government promised results by Monday evening and declared Monday a holiday. The opposition called for an afternoon protest march and threatened a general strike. According to the State Department, "independent polls" indicated a three-to-one victory for the opposition. Spokesperson Richard Boucher said the US Embassy reported that independent exit polls gave Endara 68% of the vote, compared to 23% for Duque. Endara claimed a two-to-one lead over Duque. Independent observers said exit polls "at some election stations in the capital had shown the opposition in front." Opposition groups said that government soldiers attacked an election center in the San Miguelito suburb on Monday, destroying documents for 120,000 voters, or about 10% of the country's electorate. Papal representative in Panama, Sebastian Laboa, said the priest Nicola Van Kleef, injured during an incident involving a shotgun, died Sunday evening. Laboa said Van Kleef was injured in the village of Santa Marta, located near the Costa Rican border, when announcing via a megaphone changes to his Mass schedule due to the elections. Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) called on Bush to seek the support of democratic Latin American leaders, such as Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, in an attempt to build a regional policy toward Panama. In an interview with NBC, Dodd said that he feared once again the US would be converted into a "lone ranger," if Washington attempts to manage the situation with Panama in a unilateral fashion. He added that such behavior would result in reducing support for the US in Latin America. Dodd stated that even if Endara is declared the winner in the election, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega will continue at the center of power in Panama. He added that Noriega is, in no small measure, partly Washington's creation due to the long and extensive relationship between the two. The senator stated that drug charges against him were morally correct and undeniably deserved, but that the action did not constitute wise foreign policy since it has virtually guaranteed Noriega's presence in Panama almost in perpetuity. He said that in coming months the Bush administration must formulate a policy aimed at reducing Noriega's power and advancing democracy in order to avoid having to enter into debate once again about reviewing the Panama Canal treaties. On Monday morning, Spanish deputy Fernando Suarez, president of the European Parliament Commission, who acted as an observer of the elections, said the delay in
the release of results demonstrates that "the situation is not favorable." By mid-day, ADOC had announced that Endara won 80% of the votes. In Washington, Roberto Eisenmann, editor of daily newspaper La Prensa (shut down months ago by the Panamanian government), told reporters at a press conference that Noriega and his allies were prepared for a loss of no more than 15%, but that the vote so heavily in favor of the opposition had caused "disequilibrium." Eisenmann said his sources indicated that of 155,000 votes in 624 districts (about 15% of the total), ADOC received 68.2% against 23.3% for Duque. In an interview with CBS, Carter said that Panamanians had voted overwhelmingly in favor of Endara. In Panama City, he said, results strongly favored Endara, but that until results could be obtained from throughout the country, a definitive conclusion was not possible. COLINA campaign chairperson, Ernesto Perez, told reporters that based on the coalition's count of 33% of all polling stations, Duque was ahead by 15,000 votes. ADOC asserted that based on their count of 1,039 polling places, Endara had received 67.9% of the votes, and Duque, 23.2%. On Monday afternoon, armed men in civilian clothes fired automatic weapons to break up a march in Panama City, wounding at least three people. About 15,000 participated in the march to protest raids by Noriega's soldiers, who seized vote tally sheets and prevented election results from being tabulated. The incident occurred as the two-hour march was breaking up near the Electoral Tribunal. Endara and other opposition leaders had left when a car bearing a large Duque poster drove into the crowd. Demonstrators threw stones at the car and the men inside began firing in the air. The men leaped from their car, still firing AK-47s, carbines and shotguns. A local television cameraman was shot in the chest and seriously wounded. Two other people were wounded less seriously and also hospitalized. After the confrontation, the crowd moved back about 500 yards and started building bonfires in the street. Later, military sources reported 15 arrests. At a news conference Carter said, "I hope there will be a worldwide outcry against this dictator stealing this election from his own people." He told reporters he was permitted to examine vote tallies at the election center and determined they were counterfeit. Carter said the documents at the election center were not signed by opposition poll watchers, while all sheets had been signed before leaving polling booths. The tally sheets contain numbers based on a count of ballots, which are burned afterward to prevent tampering. Carter stated that the Panamanian government stopped cooperating with his mission as soon as he raised the issues. His news conference was held in a hotel lobby as a crowd of Noriega supporters jeered outside. At a separate news conference at the officers' club at Albrook Air Force Base, the chairman of the official US delegation, Rep. John Murtha, said his group could not certify that the election was "free and fair." The 13 US observers said they witnessed fraud firsthand, watching individual Panamanian Defense Forces soldiers voting in more than one precinct around the capital. The Panamanian Committee for Human Rights, which invited 279 observers from 21 nations, also branded the election as fraudulent. The committee said the military intimidated voters and tampered with precinct tally sheets. May 9: According to AP, the first election returns announced by the government from four of 40 election districts showed Carlos Duque leading Guillermo Endara by 80,646 votes to 54,437. Notimex reported that as of 11 a.m., results from 1,820 polling places announced by the National Tribunal showed COLINA leading with 207,171 votes; ADOC with 207,171; and Nicosia, 21,448. The government removed all equipment for feeding television signals via satellite from its press center, forcing networks to fly tape to Costa Rica. During a press conference at COLINA headquarters, Duque asserted that President Bush sent "meddlers" rather than "observers." He was referring to the press conference held at the US military base on Monday. He also denounced TV Channel 8, operated by the US military in Panama, for inciting Panamanians to take to the streets and foment disorder to protest electoral fraud "which is not proven." Duque
accused ADOC of irregularities. Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter denounced TV Channel 8 broadcasts. He said the station was created only to serve and entertain US military personnel stationed in Panama as specified under the Canal treaties. Instead, it was used to misinform Panamanians about the elections in violation of the treaties, and also in violation of the government's arrangements on release of official election results. Prior to release of official results, the PRD reported that COLINA had received 48.9% of the votes compared to 43.3% for the opposition. Nils Castro, presidential adviser and party official, said that the PRD count showed that Duque received 436,210 votes compared to 386,571 for Endara. Of the total 3.3% went to Nicosia, and 4.5% of the ballots were blank or null. Bush told reporters, "Despite massive irregularities at the polls, the opposition has won a clear-cut, overwhelming victory," at a meeting at the Oval Office. "I call on General Noriega to respect the voice of the people and I call on all foreign leaders to urge General Noriega to honor the clear results of the election. "I would like to think that he (Noriega) will heed the call of the people and that he would listen to the international outcry that is building and that he would step down from office in which case the relations with the United States would improve dramatically and instantly." Bush spoke to reporters after meeting with members of the official observer delegation. Later, he met with Carter, who told Bush that a "scientific poll by the Roman Catholic Church in Panama showed the pro-Noriega candidate had won in only two polling places." Bush praised Peruvian President Alan Garcia, "who has spoken out against the fraud," and said Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez was meeting with other Latin American leaders to consider a joint statement against the alleged irregularities. White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater told reporters: "We have been considering options that range from use of military force to various economic and commercial moves related to the US presence in that country." He also said there were no plans to abrogate the Panama Canal Treaty. Carter called on Latin American nations to take the lead in persuading Noriega to resign. He suggested that the US should play a low-key role, saying "my hope is the entire world, particularly the Latin American nations, particularly the democracies" would exert pressure on Noriega to resign and accept the results of the election. Carter said Washington should not unilaterally abrogate the Panama Canal Treaty which was "a sacred issue with the Panamanians" and would "play into Noriega's hands." Endara said he planned to ask the papal representative in Panama, to convene a meeting of all foreign ambassadors in Panama so that the opposition can appeal for international pressure on Noriega. Endara said he did not feel presumptuous in requesting such a meeting, because he considers himself to be the president-elect of the nation. As a first step toward branding Noriega an international pariah, the opposition released a message from the government of Peruvian President Garcia, which expressed "condemnation and rejection of the manipulated elections," and suggested that other Latin American nations consider taking a similar stand. Endara and Arias Calderon had nothing specific to offer Panamanians, aside from urging various civic groups to publicly condemn Noriega, and telling them to keep hoping for an end to the regime. The only demonstrators the opposition could bring together were small groups of people who applauded whenever Endara emerged from the hotel that has become his post-campaign headquarters. (Basic data from several reports by AFP, AP, Xinhua, Notimex, 05/08-09/89; Copley News Service, 05/09/89)