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Panama: Summary Of Developments, May 10

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[Note: Coverage in summary form of developments in Panama dated May 11 and after will appear in next week's issues of the Central America Update. The quantity of material is "overwhelming."-Ed.] May 10: In a communique distributed Wednesday evening in Buenos Aires, the foreign ministers of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela expressed their "profound consternation" regarding the Panamanian situation, stating that the Panamanian government is isolating itself further from Latin American democracies "at an historical moment in which free popular expression has advanced tremendously throughout the hemisphere. The ministers reiterated their "commitment to continue defending the principles of non-intervention and self-determination, as well as the unconditional observance of the Panama Canal treaties." The communique said: "We ratify our conviction that the best defense of national interests...in Latin America is achieved through the free and unconditional observance of the popular will, expressed without hindrances of any kind... "In correspondence with our strict observance of non-intervention, an essential norm of foreign policy in Latin America, we abstain from issuing judgments on the causal factors and specific developments surrounding the electoral process, and with this, Panama's political crisis." Earlier in Caracas, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Enrique Tejera Paris said the Group of 8 will expel Panama if evidence demonstrates that the government had committed electoral fraud. Panama's direct participation in the "Rio Group" was suspended last year when former president Eric Arturo Delvalle was deposed by Noriega. In a televised interview, former President Jimmy Carter called on Noriega to produce original copies of the vote tallies. Costa Rican authorities reported that 30 Panamanians have sought refuge in their country as of Wednesday morning to escape violence. Police broke up an opposition demonstration with gunfire and tear gas. Opposition presidential candidate Guillermo Endara, was beaten by paramilitary attackers, and hospitalized. Ricardo Arias Calderon and Guillermo Ford, both vice presidential running mates, were also injured and hospitalized. A witness told Notimex that soldiers placed themselves between Endara and the attackers to permit him to escape. The three men were leading a motorcade when riot police reportedly began using tear gas and birdshot to disperse demonstrators. The demonstration was called to condemn the election as fraudulent, and to cheer the opposition. Crowds were small, said AP, along most of the caravan's route. Violence began when the caravan encountered a police blockade as it approached the downtown area. Official election results announced by the national tabulation center, based on about 15% of all ballots, showed pro-government coalition candidate Carlos Duque with 105,522 votes and Endara with 51,844. The Panamanian government expelled 16 foreign journalists from the country, accused of distributing "disinformation" in coverage of the May 7 election and its aftermath. Included were three reporters working for AFP, one employed by La Vanguardia (Barcelona); two Excelsior (Mexico) correspondents; two employed by the Voice of America (US); one reporter for CNN; and, two Costa Ricans whose media employer could not be identified (by Notimex). On Wednesday evening, the three-judge Electoral Tribunal annulled the elections. At a news conference, which troops prevented US reporters from attending, tribunal president Yolande Pulice said that the elections had been nullified because the Bush administration had interfered in the electoral process, and had even financed an opposition scheme to pay Panamanians up to $30 for their vote. Pulice said the Panamanian government had committed no
acts of fraud at the polls or in the vote count. She made no statement as to when new elections
would be held. Under Panamanian law, elections can be held at any time until Sept. 1, when the
term of President Manuel Solis Palma is to end. According to AFP, five people were killed in street
violence, and 23 wounded. (Basic data from several reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, Excelsior, Xinhua)

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