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Panama: Summary Of Developments, May 11-15

by Deborah Tyroler

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May 11: Before dawn Thursday, Guillermo Ford, opposition candidate for second vice president, was released from the military's Model Prison, where he had been held incommunicado since the May 10 attack during which one of his bodyguards was killed and at least 30 people injured. Ford was beaten about the head and chest by a man identified by the US Embassy May 11 as a sergeant in the Panama Defense Forces. The sergeant was wearing a sweater used by the Dignity Battalion, a paramilitary unit created by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega last year. In remarks to reporters at a Panama City hospital, Ford said he was taken before a judge late Wednesday night and immediately sentenced to a year in prison, without possibility of parole, on charges of inciting to riot and aggression against the armed forces. Three hours later, he said, a group of military officers came to his prison cell and asked him if he wanted to go home. The soldiers drove him to his home around 4 a.m. Thursday. An estimated 60 opposition supporters who were detained after the attack remained in military custody Thursday, including former newspaper publisher Luis Martins, a spokesperson for presidential candidate Guillermo Endara. Endara returned to a hospital Thursday for neurological tests. President Bush announces 2,000 more troops are to be deployed in Panama to reinforce the 10,000-plus already based along the Panama Canal, and recalls the US ambassador to Panama, Arthur Davis. Opposition candidate for first vice president, Ricardo Arias Calderon, said the opposition would be willing to negotiate an "arrangement" with the military for the formation of an interim government that would serve until Guillermo Endara could be inaugurated Sept. 1. He said that no discussions with the military were in the works. Bush administration sources said A Ambassador Davis had ordered dependents of embassy workers moved to military facilities. US government figures put the number of embassy dependents in Panama at 152. According to the US Southern Command, there are about 10,600 military dependents, 972 of whom live off-base. Another 20,000 US civilians reside in Panama, most retirees or in private business. The US State Department urged representatives of US businesses based in Panama to evacuate their families. Pentagon officials said the Southern Command and Defense Department had not issued any orders for relocation of dependents of military personnel. US personnel were told to stay out of public places unless on official business, and then to appear only in civilian clothes. Spain, Peru, and Argentina condemned the annulment of the elections. Britain demanded that Noriega resign. The Panamanian military reported that four soldiers were wounded in an exchange of gunfire that followed the confrontation on Wednesday. The opposition urged the Organization of American States to adopt political and diplomatic measures against the Noriega regime. Ricardo Arias Calderon declared that "all possible forms of peaceful resistance" would be taken to press the opposition's claim to victory. He said the opposition had not requested the 2,000 reinforcements for the Southern Command announced by Bush. On Thursday evening, the government-run TV network denounced Bush's decision to send troop reinforcements to Panama as "yet another escalation of US aggression against Panama." Maj. Daniel Delgado, a Panama Defense Forces officer who is attached to the foreign ministry, accused Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez of seeking to instigate a coup against Noriega. Delgado said Perez had asked the military attache at the Panamanian embassy in Bogota, Colombia, to lead a rebellion against Noriega. A spokesperson for the Venezuelan Embassy in Panama City denied the charge. Perez has publicly urged Noriega to resign as commander of the

15,000-member Panamanian Defense Forces. Panama's National Electoral Tribunal declared that reports on irregularities in vote counting were false. According to the statement, electoral officials "did not alter a single word, nor a single number in the information provided on the tally sheets." The Tribunal stated that it had nullified the election because of "vote buying," and a "shortage of ballots" that made it "absolutely impossible to declare a winner under conditions of coercion and violence." The Honduran Foreign Ministry announced that the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela have expressed concern regarding Panama's May 7 elections, and requested that the OAS review the situation. May 12: In northern California, hundreds of soldiers with the Army's 7th Light Infantry Division left Fort Ord and prepared to leave for Panama from Travis Air Force Base outside San Francisco. The Mexican government announced decision to recall Ambassador to Panama, Carlos Planck, for consultation. In a statement published in Panamanian newspapers and broadcast on government-run TV and radio, pro-government coalition (COLINA) presidential candidate, Carlos Duque, said that the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) has organized discussions to study options for "strengthening the party" following the annulment of the May 7 election. According to Duque, the US government attempted "at all costs" to impose its own choice for president of Panama. He added that for the US, Panama's president was to be its own choice "or nothing." Duque, PRD president, expressed gratitude to all Panamanian voters who had "placed their trust" in him and other COLINA candidates. A statement by the PRD said that the reasons for voiding the Sunday election results "have a great deal to do with open and shameless US interference" in Panama's electoral process. In a statement, president of Mexico's National Action Party (PAN), Manuel Clouthier, condemned all forms of US intervention, and called on Panamanian authorities to "respect the will of the Panamanian people" who had voted May 7 for the opposition coalition headed by Guillermo Endara. The Mexican Revolutionary Authentic Party (PARM) denounced "persistent US intervention" in the domestic politics of Latin American nations. The National Reconstruction Party of the Cardenista Front (PFCRN) called on the US to terminate interference in Panama's domestic politics. In a statement, the party said it had accepted the annulment of the May 7 election "because it represents a political response by Panamanians to the US." In Bonn, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher accused Noriega of election rigging which he said amounted to an assault on democracy. OAS spokespersons announced that an extraordinary meeting of member-nations' foreign ministers would take place next week. The last such session occurred in 1982, when ministers met to issue a resolution on the war between Britain and Argentina over the Malvinas islands. In 1979, Latin American foreign ministers issued a resolution condemning Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. May 12: Most soldiers returned to the barracks, and shops, banks and offices resumed normal work schedules. A few detachments of riot police were deployed in strategic positions around the city. COLINA presidential candidate Carlos Duque said he opposed voiding of the election, which he claimed to have won. According to unconfirmed reports cited by AFP, the present government of President Manuel Solis Palma to stay in office until at least Sept. 1, is studying options ranging from the possibility of extending the Palma administration for another two years to holding new elections in July. The Interamerican Regional Labor Organization (ORIT), which represents 35 million unionized Latin American workers, urged the US to avoid the use of armed intervention in Panama, but also called on the Panamanian government to respect "the will of the people." ORIT secretary-general Luis Andersen, who was Panama's labor minister during the administration of Omar Torrijos, said it was clear that the Panamanian people had voted to replace the current regime in the May 7 election. In New York, UN spokesperson Nadia Younes said the situation in Panama was "an

internal affair." Panama's National Private Enterprise Council denounced the annulment of the elections and demanded that civilian and military authorities respect the opposition's electoral victory. In a public communique, the Council condemned the "brutal attack" perpetrated by soldiers troops and paramilitary groups at the service of the regime against Guillermo Endara and Guillermo Ford. Unidentified sources told Notimex that Christian Democrat Party leaders are meeting with Council members to delineate a joint policy. The Christian Democrat party is the largest of the three parties under the opposition coalition, the Civil Opposition Democratic Alliance (ADOC). Families of US embassy personnel were relocated to military bases, and non-essential embassy personnel began preparations to leave the country. A joint statement signed by leaders of party factions represented in the Mexican Congress expressed the congresspersons' "concern over developments in Panama following that nation's annulled presidential elections, and possible implications that may hinder efforts...aimed at promoting peace in Central America." The legislators called for "strict observance" of self-determination and non-intervention in international diplomacy, and reiterated support for the Panama Canal treaties. In statements to Notimex during a telephone interview, Robert Pastor former Latin American affairs adviser on the National Security Council during the Carter administration, said that President Bush's posture thus far on the Panama crisis was positive. He said that the president's support for initiatives by Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez, Peruvian President Alan Garcia and other Latin American leaders was worthy of applause. Pastor spoke with the Mexican government news agency from his office at Emory University (Atlanta, Ga.). In reference to the May 15 foreign ministers meeting at the Organization of American States, Pastor said Washington risks returning to the unilateralism of the last eight years unless Latin America and the US are able to orchestrate new channels of cooperation via the OAS. Mark Edelman, a professor of Latin American studies at Yale University, told Notimex that Bush's multilateral approach is a "refreshing change" after the failures of the Reagan administration. He added that multilateralism constitutes evidence of a "more sophisticated" perspective on US relations with Latin America. According to Edelman, although Bush has attempted to distance himself from the simplistic approach of the Reagan years, he has a long way to go. For instance, said the professor, Bush's appointments of ambassadors to Latin American countries are the previous administration's legacy. May 13: According to the Washington Post, Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez will request foreign ministers from throughout the hemisphere to support a resolution calling on Noriega to resign. He has also offered asylum to Noriega, and proposed the expulsion of Panama from the Group of 8. In San Salvador, commanders of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) released a joint communique expressing their willingness to fight alongside the Panamanian people in the event of military intervention. The communique declared that military force in Panama would "generalize the war throughout the Central American region." The communique called on the governments of Latin America to avoid being pulled along into the Bush administration's interventionist policy toward Panama. Collaborating with the US in this situation, said the commanders, would hinder the peace negotiations in Central America that have developed with the assistance of Latin American countries. The communique was signed by Cmdrs. Shafick Handal, Roberto Roca, Leonel Gonzalez, Joaquin Villalobos, German Cienfuegos. They declared their solidarity with the government and people of Panama "in their just struggle for recovery of sovereignty over the Canal." The Nationalist Democratic Union party (UDN), the National Salvadoran Workers Union (UNTS) and the University of El Salvador issued statements asserting that military intervention in Panama would cause regression in the Central American peace process. The Costa Rican government condemned Panamanian authorities for a "flagrant lack of respect for the sovereign will of the Panamanian people," and repudiated the

Electoral Tribunal's decision to annul the May 7 election. Aggression against opposition presidential candidate Guillermo Endara and vice presidential candidates Ricardo Arias Calderon and Guillermo Ford were also condemned. Panamanian Deputy Labor Minister Victor Callado said that the government will declare illegal attempts by the opposition on May 17 to close shops, factories and other businesses. Panamanian daily *Critica* dedicated a half-page to editorials appearing in Mexican newspapers *La Jornada* and *Uno Mas Uno* asserting that Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez's actions were tantamount to support for a coup in Panama. The newspapers also denounced Bush for sending troop reinforcements to Panama. The Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), which objected to the annulment of the elections, reiterated its call for a dialogue among Panamanians to "begin the democratization process without foreign manipulation, interference or intimidation." The PRD communique said the party had objected to the Tribunal's decision because its action had effectively resulted in the defamation of party president Carlos Duque. The Panamanian government announced a decision to postpone the opening of public and private schools. The school year was scheduled to begin May 22 for 660,000 primary, secondary and university students, and teachers were to report May 15 until the school year was postponed for security reasons. In a full-page advertisement in *La Estrella de Panama*, the Christian Democrat party claimed that the Election Tribunal, as a partner in the alleged vote fraud, lacks the moral authority to nullify the elections. Aboard the presidential jet en route to Columbus, Mississippi, President Bush called on Panamanians to drive strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega out of office. He told reporters, "The will of the people should be implemented. I would love to see him out of there. The Panamanian people should do everything to get him out of office. The will of the people should not be thwarted by this man and his Dobermans (anti-riot troops)." Washington would have good relations with the people of Panama and the defense forces now headed by Noriega if he were thrown out, Bush said. He added that Venezuela and other countries had been approached about providing exile for Noriega. Bush said the nearly 2,000 Marines and soldiers sent to reinforce the over 10,000 troops along the Canal were not there to intervene. President of Panama's Christian Democrat Party and vice presidential candidate for ADOC, Ricardo Arias Calderon, said the opposition's general strike scheduled to begin May 17 would continue until the government recognized ADOC's victory in the May 7 election. Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter criticized the dispatch of an additional 2,000 US troops to Panama, describing it as a violation of the canal agreements. He said the 10,000 US troops deployed in the country had the task of protecting the canal and not to prepare for an invasion of Panama. US officials said that the deployment of additional troops in the Canal Zone would be completed by Sunday. A total of 70 flights are necessary to transport the troops from North Carolina, California and Texas. May 14: In an interview with NBC, Sol Linowitz, former US ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), said the US must avoid unilateral actions in Panama, seeking instead a joint response alongside Latin American nations. He expressed concern over President Bush's call to the people of Panama and the military to overthrow Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. According to Linowitz, Bush made implicit that if the Panamanians acted to remove Noriega, the US would help. He added that he was not sure the US public had made that decision. Linowitz pointed out that the remark also indicated the hope that other nations would take the same course of action and this also "presents questions." Linowitz, a principal negotiator of the 1977 Canal treaties, affirmed that under no circumstance should the treaties be canceled. He asserted that if the US abrogates the existing treaty, it would have no legal basis for its presence in Panama. Next, Linowitz warned against the assumption that once Noriega is removed from power, the Panamanian problem will be resolved. He said such action would only be a first step. On radio and television in Panama,

military sources continually reiterated that the Panama Defense Forces and the "dignity battalion" have closed rank around Gen. Noriega. Another continual "announcement" indicates that the Nicaraguan Army and revolutionary groups throughout the region will support Panama in the event of US military intervention. Panamanian authorities arrested TV cameraperson Steve Blanco and journalist Carl Hersch of ABC. The two men were covering protests at church services organized by the opposition. At Catholic masses, laypersons read a pastoral letter condemning the beating of political candidates, the annulment of the elections and other actions by Gen. Noriega. The letter asked the PDF not to use weapons against "a defenseless people" and asked for solidarity and prayer. The letter was originally issued May 11 by Archbishop Marcos McGrath and other bishops of Panama's Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference. The letter was read during a broadcast service on state-run television. The 1,881 troops ordered in by President George Bush set up tents around Panama Canal bases a few miles from the capital. The Panamanian government had no reaction to Bush's call Saturday for the overthrow of Noriega by the Defense Forces. The nation was so calm Saturday, said the government, that many Panamanian troops were being given leave. According to AP, there were almost no troops visible. A Notimex correspondent wrote that activities on Sunday in close proximity to US and Panamanian military bases did not suggest a country in danger of military invasion and virtual civil war. At a plaza in the former Canal Zone, a Cuban orchestra called the "New Generation" (Nueva Generacion) played music. Another orchestra pertaining to one of the PDF's elite forces, the "Machos de Monte," sponsored a public dance. Panamanians mixed with US soldiers throughout the afternoon and early evening listening to music and drinking beer. [Channel 8 (US Southern Command TV) warned viewers to avoid the area since the dignity battalion was planning a political rally in the locale.] Vice presidential candidate Guillermo Ford said the opposition will issue a call for a one-day general strike Wednesday "to show the will of the Panamanian people." The stoppage is to coincide with a meeting of the OAS in Washington to discuss the Panamanian situation. Ford said the Panamanian opposition would be represented. Ricardo Arias Calderon said he hoped for firm action from the OAS, including a possible political and diplomatic embargo of Panama, if Noriega does not recognize the election results. He said the opposition has the names of 157 opposition figures jailed since May 10 in the Panama City area and that the number may reach 300 nationwide. The estimated 10,000 US troops already stationed in Panama have been ordered to avoid public areas except on official business. May 14: In an interview with Notimex in San Jose, Nicaraguan Resistance directorate member Alfredo Cesar said that if Latin America does not energetically condemn the electoral fraud in Panama, "they will provide incentive in an indirect fashion" for "military measures." Cesar, who resides in Miami, traveled to San Jose to help organize a meeting attended by representatives of 14 of Nicaragua's domestic opposition parties and various exile groups with the aim of developing a joint platform and a single candidate for the Nicaraguan elections in February. He said that the resolution adopted by the OAS on Wednesday is going to impact on the Nicaraguan electoral process. Cesar asserted that if Noriega is permitted to get away with electoral fraud, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua "will feel encouraged to do the same." At the close of an extraordinary session, the executive committee of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) reiterated its "opposition against all fabrications by US imperialism disguised as support for democracy..." Next, the committee said it had forwarded a document to UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar accusing the US of having "provided more than \$120 million" to the opposition for the May 7 elections. The document also asserted that President Bush had also attempted to manipulate the Panamanian electoral process by converting the installations of the US Southern Command into headquarters for espionage and psychological warfare in Panama. On Sunday evening, in a communique released by the Mexican Foreign

Ministry, the Panamanian authorities were called on to "give proof of political maturity" and seek solutions to domestic conflicts based on respect for the Panamanian people's rights and preferences. The Mexican government declared that it is "lamentable that the Panamanian situation has been aggravated by the personal attitudes of Gen. (Manuel Antonio) Noriega, whose moral and ethical reputation has been discredited." Next, the statement said that Noriega has permitted his personal interests to take precedence over those of the Panamanian people. The text affirmed that during the May 17 meeting of the OAS, "Mexico will abstain from pronouncements on domestic affairs" that are the exclusive dominion of the state in question. The ministry said Mexico rejected the idea that the OAS might become "a critic of Latin American electoral processes." Every country, it said, "has a right to choose its political, economic and social system without foreign intervention." The opposition announced that there is nothing to negotiate with the authorities because its candidates won the elections. A provisional government, they said, could be established only if their electoral victory is recognized. May 15: Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal told AFP that the OAS is considering the expulsion of the Panamanian government, among other sanctions. Madrigal said the OAS is also contemplating sanctions to stop the "violation of human rights" in Panama. PRD deputy Rigoberto Paredes told reporters that among the options under consideration by members of the Panamanian national legislature are the creation of a provisional junta that would formulate guidelines for new elections; the establishment of a national constituent assembly; the creation of a lower legislative chamber; and, adoption of a prime minister executive system. He said a new election is not likely to be arranged before Sept. 1. In statements released Monday, the National Federation of Public Employee Associations and Organizations (FENASEP) and the National Council of Organized Workers (CONATO) declared their willingness to resist a possible invasion, and threatened to occupy workplaces on May 17 in response to a strike organized by employers. Since May 1, the unions have asserted that in the event of a work stoppage such as those organized by the opposition last year, they would occupy work locales. At a news conference prior to his departure for Washington, US Ambassador Arthur Davis declared that Gen. Noriega ordered the May 10 attack on opposition candidates in an attempt to assassinate one of them. The ambassador said witness reports and the type of wounds sustained by Guillermo Ford "showed that the attack was designed to kill him." Davis said he could not reveal details of the evidence and said he did not know why Ford was targeted. The ambassador also said the departure of Noriega will occur as a result of divisions and disagreements existing among the Defense Forces in relation to Noriega's actions. Davis said his condemnation of Noriega did not extend to "the entire" military: "I know there are honorable, professional officers and soldiers in the PDF who deplore the cowardly use of violence against their own unarmed population." The New York Times (05/16/89) cited several unidentified administration officials and Panamanian exiles who said they hoped that the OAS would adopt a resolution similar to one passed in June 1979, when the organization called for the "immediate and definitive replacement" of the Nicaraguan regime headed by Somoza. Speaking on a TV interview program in Caracas, President Carlos Andres Perez said that his government would provide political asylum to Noriega to help resolve Panama's political and electoral crisis. (Basic data from numerous reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, Xinhua, 05/11-16/89; New York Times, 05/16/89; Noticias Argentinas, 05/12/89, 05/14/89)

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