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Deborah Tyroler

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Oas Resolution On Panama: Summary, Reactions

by Deborah Tyroler
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In a resolution passed late May 17 at the end of an emergency meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS), 31 member-nations' foreign ministers agreed to send a mission to Panama in an attempt to resolve the conflict between the opposition and the government. The resolution was approved unanimously. The resolution offered by Peru and co-sponsored by Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela Peruvian called for Secretary General Joao Baena Soares to send a mission to Panama with the aim of promoting a "national accord that ensures, within democratic mechanisms and in the shortest period possible, the transfer of power with full respect for the sovereign will of Panamanian people." The mission, comprised of the foreign ministers of Ecuador, Guatemala and Trinidad and Tobago, is tentatively scheduled to arrive in Panama May 22, and will report back to the OAS by June 5. The foreign ministers agreed to reconvene June 6 to consider "further appropriate measures." The original draft resolution did not mention Noriega by name, but was amended later to read, "the grave events and abuses" by Gen. Noriega "could unleash an escalation of violence" in the isthmus. Unidentified diplomatic sources told AFP that the amendment containing direct reference to the general was included to satisfy the United States. The amendment was put to a vote in closed session and passed 20 to two with seven abstentions. Nicaragua and Panama voted against the amendment mentioning Noriega by name. [The seven nations that decided to abstain were not identified in the sources included here.] The resolution condemned the Panamanian government's actions, but emphasized that no state or group of states in the OAS has the right to intervene, either directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of another member state. Peruvian Foreign Minister Guillermo Larco Cox said, "The fate of our organization and the future of the hemisphere await the understandings we may reach here today to establish democracy" in Panama. He asserted that if OAS members want the US to refrain from unilateral action, they must take the initiative in condemning the recent abuses in Panama. Larco Cox said that US economic sanctions imposed on Panama in 1988 have failed. He described the imposition of such sanctions as a "condemnable action" that "may strengthen the Noriega regime" by giving the general an effective tool for strengthening anti-US sentiment. Next, said the minister, if the US took military action to depose Noriega, it "would undermine the moral authority" needed for a lasting political settlement of the crisis. Unidentified Bush administration officials told the New York Times they perceived no contradiction between seeking Noriega's ouster and supporting the principle of non-intervention, because the people of Panama wanted to see the general removed from power. US Secretary of State James Baker had urged Venezuela to lead an OAS call for the removal of Gen. Noriega. Baker, however, was satisfied with the results of the meeting. The resolution, he said, showed the extent of Noriega's isolation in the region. Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Eduardo Ritter said he was pleased with the decision to send the mission since it would provide "a good opportunity for the OAS to see the reality, the true Panamanian reality." He also asserted that the US was seeking to "personalize the problem" by directly attacking Gen. Noriega. Ritter promised that his government will cooperate fully with the mediators. The Panamanian government has accused the US of intervention in the May 7 election via purchasing votes and providing covert aid to the opposition known as the Civic Opposition Democratic Coalition (ADOC). Unidentified
diplomatic sources told AFP that the foreign ministers rejected two amendments proposed by Nicaragua, charging that the dispatch of some 2,000 additional US troops to Panama heightened tensions in the country and calling for the withdrawal of those troops. A group of pro-Noriega students peacefully occupied the OAS offices to launch a 48-hour hunger strike in protest of any action that might be taken by the OAS against the commander of the Panama Defense Forces. In a statement aired by the government's Radio Nacional, Rigoberto Paredes, an official of the governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), said that the OAS has no authority over Panama. The OAS mission, he said, "must not come with the proposal that Noriega leave, because that is an internal Panamanian affair." He rejected installation of "a puppet government of the United States," a reference to ADOC. On May 18, PRD secretary-general Daniel Espino said that his party considers the OAS resolution to be contradictory. On the one hand, he said, the resolution speaks of non-intervention, and on the other, of abuses by Gen. Noriega, a statement which constitutes intervention in Panamanian affairs. Espino asserted that chastising Noriega by name in the resolution was yet another demonstration of the inter-American organization's decline. The deterioration of the OAS, he said, as a genuine forum for the hemisphere grounded on principles of non-intervention and national self-determination has been evident for several years. Espino said the creation of the Contadora Group and the Group of 8 (also known as the Rio Group) was an indicator of OAS decline. A communiqué by the Mexican Foreign Ministry released on Thursday said that the OAS resolution reflected the principles of self-determination and non-intervention, and of respect for the Panama Canal treaties. Thus, said the ministry, the resolution "responds fully" to the principles of Mexico's foreign policy and its OAS delegates' objectives. The communiqué said the resolution "clearly establishes the difference" between the struggle to preserve Panamanian sovereignty, and the role played by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Panamanian Archbishop Marcos McGrath described the OAS resolution as a "great step forward." He added, "I'm gratified that the organization has taken this seriously and that it is bringing to bear its influence, counsel, exhortations and, to a certain extent, threats." Ricardo Arias Calderon, opposition candidate for first vice president in the May 7 election interpreted the OAS resolution as a demand for Noriega's departure. He said, "It is important to note that the resolution speaks of a transfer of power and that it insists that Noriega must retire." (Basic data from Notimex, 05/17/89, 05/18/89; AFP, AP, Reuters, Copley News Service, 05/18/89; New York Times, 05/19/89)