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Panama: Noriega Addresses U.S. Demands, Denies Link To Beatings Of Opposition Candidates

by Deborah Tyroler

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On May 17, in his first interview since the May 7 election, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega criticized President Bush's call for his ouster. He told France's Antenne 2 network, "The Panamanian conscience cannot accept appeals from men who direct this imperialism." "We have made it a point of our doctrine that this is not one man's struggle, but the struggle of many men and many people here at the shore of the canal," said Noriega. "It's Panama's fight against an empire that has to leave." Noriega denied his forces beat opposition leaders on May 10. "The police gave their protection to the candidates. I have as proof that those who were injured were members of the police forces," he said, showing photographs of what apparently were hospitalized policemen. Noriega asserted that US efforts to prompt his ouster were provoked by a desire to break the Panama Canal treaties. The treaties signed in 1977 by Presidents Jimmy Carter and Brig. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera, he said, are "to give sovereignty over the canal and several nearby American military bases by the end of the century...The point of confrontation is the canal and the military bases." The general asserted that the US-backed effort to overthrow him was intended to set up a client state to protect US power and influence in the region. He said, "All of us Panamanians would have to leave and leave the country to the North Americans because what they want is docile men, so that they will relinquish the military bases, so that they will relinquish sovereignty." Noriega implied that he had not been consulted or had any influence on the decision to nullify the election. The decision came after an opposition protest march in which paramilitary forces attacked and beat the top two opposition candidates. (Basic data from AFP, AP, 05/17/89)

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