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Panamanian Guards Employed By Company Contracted By U.S. Government Detained

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On May 19, the US Embassy in Panama reported that security forces had detained 17 Panamanian guards who protect Embassy offices and other buildings owned or contracted by the US government in Panama City. Embassy spokesperson Terrence Kneebone said May 20 that Panamanian detectives were asking detailed questions about security procedures during their interrogation of the guards. Some were taken into custody May 17, he said, and some voluntarily appeared at a police station for questioning May 18. On Wednesday afternoon, Kneebone said, police arrived at the home of the business representative of the guards’ company and tried to arrest him. When police failed to locate the business representative, he said, they arrested his wife, who was a bookkeeper for the company. The police also seized company records and CB radios. Later that day, Kneebone said, the police arrested two supervisors for the company and three guards. The police spread the word they merely wanted to question employees of the company, Kneebone said, and 11 other guards subsequently turned themselves in for questioning. Fifteen of the guards detained were quickly released. The US government is the sole client of Tesna-Misma company, employer of 87 people, including guards, supervisors and office staff, according to Kneebone. The Panamanian government said the guards were questioned as part of an investigation into violence May 10 when Noriega supporters attacked members of the opposition. The government claimed the bodyguards were trained by the US military. One man who had worked for Tesna-Misma was shot to death in the attack, and another former employee was wounded. The two former employees of the company were serving as bodyguards for Guillermo Ford, an opposition vice presidential candidate. (Basic data from AP, 05/19/89, 05/20/89; Copley News Service, New York Times, 05/20/89)

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