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Oas Mission Seeking Peaceful Transfer Of Power In Panama Extended Six Weeks

By Deborah Tyroler

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On the evening of June 6, foreign ministers of Organization of American States member-nations agreed to give a six-week extension to a mediation team assigned the task of suggesting means to promote a peaceful transfer of power in Panama. The mediators are to report back to the OAS before July 19. In a May 17 emergency meeting of foreign ministers, the OAS condemned Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega for electoral "abuses" and agreed to send a four-member team to Panama to seek agreement on a transfer of power as soon as possible. The commission, comprised of OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares, and the foreign ministers of Ecuador, Guatemala and Trinidad and Tobago, left Panama May 27 after a week of talks with the country's political leaders, including Gen. Noriega. In their five-page report, the group outlined meetings and interviews held in Panama and proposed extending their work, saying they believed they would be able to create a basis of understanding which could end the crisis. Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter raised no objection to the six-week extension proposal. The agreement was reached in early evening after closed-door talks at the Colombian Embassy. US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger said the OAS must take account of charter provisions calling for the establishment of representative democracy as a guiding hemispheric principle. He said the OAS must consider "further action" against Panama if progress toward democracy is not achieved quickly. Ritter argued that a "durable solution" to Panama's crisis was not possible as long as US troops remain in the country and the US does not lift the economic sanctions imposed against Panama 15 months ago. Elaborating on an earlier speech made to the ministers, Ritter told reporters, "There can be no normal political process under the current circumstances in Panama." The ministers reportedly spent most of their time discussing the propriety of giving the mediators a reporting deadline or making their mission open-ended. The mediators were said to oppose the imposition of a deadline. The US and other delegates argued that an open-ended mission would ease pressure on Noriega. The US delegation, led by Eagleburger, had lobbied for the mediators to report in 15 days but settled on six weeks. (Basic data from AP, AFP, 06/06/89)

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