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Panama: Political Talks Begin; Noriega To Stay

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According to a statement released July 15 by the Organization of American States (OAS), representatives of the political opposition, the executive branch, pro-government parties and the Panamanian Defense Forces agreed to begin talks July 16 on Panama's political crisis following the annulment of the May 17 general elections. The statement said that the talks would commence "with no agenda or preconditions." On July 17, the Panamanian government asserted that Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega will not step down as commander-in-chief of the Panamanian Defense Forces. Earlier, government officials had said they were willing to listen to a proposal for the departure of Noriega in talks that began July 16 under sponsorship of the Organization of American States (OAS). During a break in the talks on July 17, opposition leader Ricardo Arias Calderon said, "The main differences are over fundamental issues." Carlos Duque, pro-government party representative, said the during the break: "Noriega is not negotiable." Before the session commenced, Duque said government representatives would consider Noriega's departure but they also want two US generals to leave and US sanctions to end. "We will bring the evidence to defend Noriega's case," Duque said. "They can bring it up as we could bring up the departure of Gen. (Marc) Cisneros and Gen. (Fred) Woerner, and an end to the US economic aggressions and the withdrawal of the additional US troops sent to Panama." Woerner heads the Southern Command, and Cisneros is commander of Army troops charged with the defense of the Canal. Cisneros often is criticized locally for his anti-Noriega statements and the military maneuvers and exercises his forces conduct. At the end of the Monday session, both sides announced they had agreed on an agenda for subsequent talks. Issues of importance to the opposition were recognition of their purported victory in the May 7 election, departure of Noriega from power, changes in military structure, defining what is meant by transfer of power, and human rights violations. For government and military representatives, the principal issues we could bring up the departure of Gen. (Marc) Cisneros and Gen. (Fred) Woerner, and an end to the US economic aggressions and the withdrawal of the additional US troops sent to Panama; an end to economic aggression and return of Panamanian funds held by the United States; strict compliance with the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, and no US interference in Panamanian political affairs. The meeting was arranged by an OAS mission led by foreign minister Diego Cordovez of Ecuador. Other members of the mission are OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Mario Palencia, and Sahadeo Basdeo, Foreign Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. The OAS diplomats were to leave Tuesday for Washington to present a report on developments in Panama on July 19 to the OAS General Assembly. Negotiations were scheduled to resume when the diplomats return to Panama. Noriega did not attend the Monday meeting. Instead, he attended a session of the State Council, which is studying a proposal for forming a junta after Sept. 1, when the government's term ends. On July 19, the OAS General Assembly voted in favor of extending the diplomatic mission toward mediation and resolution of Panama's political crisis. (Basic data from AFP, 07/15/89; AP, 07/17/89, 07/20/89)

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