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On Detention Of 29 Panamanians By U.S. Soldiers, Retaliation

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Aug. 8, Southern Command spokesperson Mercedes Morris said US soldiers had detained 29 Panamanians who entered a restricted military area, and released them 1-1/4 hours later after confiscating their weapons. Morris said that among the 29 were nine officers and troopers of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), including Maj. Manuel Sieiro, brother-in-law of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Next, the spokesperson said five Panamanian journalists were among the civilians in the group. Morris told AP in a telephone interview that about 40 US Marines were conducting "a reconnaissance exercise on roads" leading to the Panama Canal when the Panamanians entered the area in 15 vehicles. A number of submachine guns, rifles and pistols were confiscated, said Morris, and will be returned to the PDF through a US-Panamanian coordinating commission in charge of handling problems related to the security and defense of the canal. When asked if the Panamanians were held at gunpoint, she said, "The necessary security measures required in this case were taken." According to Alberto de Santis, mayor of the town of Arrijan, nine miles west of Panama City and near the site of the incident, the Panamanians were "stopped at gunpoint" by the Marines and held for 2 hours and 45 minutes. He told reporters that about 100 people demonstrated against the US troops as they passed through the town in six armored vehicles. The Panamanian vehicles then appeared and followed the Marines, said De Santis. He added that in a jungle area a few miles outside of town the US vehicles turned around and the Marines surrounded the Panamanians at gunpoint and detained them. Sieiro is PDF commander for the Chorrera military area, west of the capital and in the area where the incident occurred. On Aug. 9, Panamanian military authorities arrested US soldiers at Fort Amador, and US troops then blocked the entrance to the area. Southern Command spokesperson Col. Ronald Sconyers refused to provide details of the arrests, saying only that a "plural number" of US military personnel were detained in the Fort Amador area. The action was apparently in retaliation for the detention of 29 Panamanians by US Marines on Tuesday. Fort Amador is a joint-use area that includes barracks for Panamanian troops, a building where Gen. Noriega has an office, several Southern Command offices, a US naval station and a golf course and clubs used by US personnel. After the US soldiers were arrested, four US armored personnel carriers blocked the entrance. Witnesses told AP that several Panamanians were arrested. Civilians were permitted to enter and depart, but the US soldiers refused to permit entry for Panamanian military personnel. Unidentified sources cited by AP said blocking the entrance delayed a Panamanian anti-terrorist unit from holding an exercise at the National Bank of Panama since it was prevented from taking trucks and other equipment from Fort Amador. Next, AP reported that a few dozen troops from the two countries lined a street that divides Quarry Heights, where Southern Command headquarters is located, from Panama City. (Basic data from AP, 08/08/89, 08/09/89; Xinhua, 08/09/89)

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