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Panama Requests U.N. Military Observers

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Aug. 11, the Panamanian government asked the UN Security Council to deploy military observers to monitor what was described as escalating tensions between US and Panamanian troops. Panama's Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter asked the Council to send the observers "as early as next Monday" to ensure that the US terminates its acts of aggression against Panama. Ritter said he could document "hundreds of cases" of incidents by US troops stationed in Panama against Panamanian citizens. "Only yesterday, in an act of insolent arrogance, US troops seized a section of Panama's highway and subjected all passengers on buses to humiliating searches. US actions have been those of an army of occupation. The US has been trying to bring about responses that would justify taking Panama by force," said the minister. Ritter accused Washington of violating the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties' provisions on the movements and behaviour of the estimated 13,000 US troops stationed in Panama. The five permanent members of the Security Council, including the US, were shown a videotape of US soldiers in armored personnel carriers in Panama City. Some of the soldiers were seen stopping civilian traffic. Ritter asserted that US forces had virtually turned his country into a war zone and called on the Security Council to guarantee respect of the Canal treaties. The Security Council took no action on Panama's request for military observers. Council president, Hocine Djoudi of Algeria, said members would hold consultations to decide on another meeting. US Ambassador Herbert Okun said Ritter's statement was "full of fabrications and falsehoods." He justified expansion of US forces in Panama, saying that the action was taken "in direct response to hostile actions of the Noriega regime." White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater denied any correlation between US military exercises in Panama during the week, and President Bush's recent statement that he may consider kidnapping Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. He was referring to Bush's statement in an interview with Hearst newspapers on Aug. 9 that he might consider seizing Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to stand trial on drug trafficking charges. Fitzwater said the exercises by US troops in Panama were routine maneuvers, but that they also constituted to some degree a show of force. On Aug. 14, Panama's representative at the UN, Leonardo Kam, said that UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar will begin informal talks on the incident to examine the possibility of sending military observers to Panama. (Basic data from AP, AFP, 08/11/89; Xinhua, 08/11/89, 08/14/89; New York Times, 08/12/89)

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