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Peruvian President Suggests U.S. Turn Over Panama Canal Early To Accelerate Noriega's Departure

by Deborah Tyroler

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In an editorial published in the New York Times on Aug. 21, Peruvian President Alan Garcia proposed that the US turn over the Panama Canal to Panama earlier than the 1999 deadline in order to speed up the departure of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Washington, said Garcia, should agree to give up control of the Canal but only to a freely elected government. According to President Garcia, if the above promise is made, "Gen. Noriega would be left without an argument before his own defense forces and all those for whom the recovery of the Canal Zone is a matter of historic justice...With one declaration, the United States could convert him into a figure that Panamanians recognize as an obstacle to democracy and the nationalization of the canal." Garcia said that Latin American governments have exhausted their capacity to pressure Gen. Noriega, who has demonstrated that the Panamanian government can resist all US economic sanctions. "What is the importance for the U.S. of having the canal for four or five years longer if it will be handed over to Panama anyway?" Garcia wrote. "Nothing essential, no principle, will be sacrificed. And how important are a few years, when compared to ending a dictatorship on the continent?"

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