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Special O.a.s. Meeting At U.S. Request To Present Evidence Of Panamanian General's Alleged Involvement In Drug Trade

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Aug. 31, the Organization of American States held a special meeting at its headquarters in Washington to hear evidence of Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega's alleged involvement in drug trafficking. The US requested the meeting after an OAS mediating team last week approved a resolution that did not call on Noriega to resign, and Panama's delegate to the OAS, Romulo Escobar Bethancourt, challenged Washington to present evidence of the alleged wrongdoings. The OAS press department said Washington wanted to present "a summary of the evidence and elaboration of the United States position on the critical situation in Panama." In February 1988, Noriega was indicted by two federal grand juries in Florida on charges of drug trafficking and racketeering. On Thursday, the OAS special session convened to hear Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger present US evidence against Noriega. Eagleburger said the general had accumulated a personal fortune of $200 million to $300 million, mainly through drug trafficking and other criminal activities. He asserted that Noriega had protected cocaine shipments flown from Medellin, Colombia, through Panama to the US; arranged for the shipment and sale of ether and acetone to the Medellin drug mafia; and provided a refuge and a base for operations to members of the Medellin mafia after the 1984 murder of Colombian Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Next, Eagleburger said Noriega agreed to protect a cocaine laboratory constructed in Darien department, Panama; and ensured drug money laundering by Panamanian banks. He added that the general received over $4.6 million in compensation for these services. Eagleburger disclosed a letter from Noriega to a London bank ordering the transfer of $14,936,426 to a bank in Luxembourg. The letter was dated three days after the US indictments against Noriega were made public: Feb. 8, 1988. The deputy secretary said that in addition to huge bank deposits in Panama, Noriega owns luxury apartments in Paris and the Dominican Republic, three yachts and several planes. He asserted that Gen. Noriega is a corrupt man who knows no limitations. Eagleburger provided copies of the bank documents to the OAS Secretariat. According to Notimex, journalists received no copies of documents regarding evidence of Noriega's personal wealth or other matters. The deputy secretary said that under an agreement with the armed forces, Noriega should have retired in 1987. Instead, he added, the general remained in the post filling his pockets and helping the drug mafia to destroy democracy in America. In response to Eagleburger's statements, Frank Robine, an attorney representing Noriega at the session, said the US official presented only charges and no proof. Next, the attorney said the 1988 indictments against the general by the two Florida district courts were based on charges made by persons paid and sustained by the US government. In any event, said Robine, all crimes Noriega was charged with were presumably committed in Panama. Consequently, he added, the general should not be subject to extradition to the US. The attorney continued by asserting that Eagleburger's comments violated US constitutional precepts in that accused persons are presumed innocent until proven guilty. He then charged that the US has departed from norms of decency in conducting diplomacy with Panama. An example of this absence of decency, said the attorney, was the May 1988 offer by State Department officials to drop
the charges against Noriega if he would resign as commander-in-chief of the Panamanian Defense Forces. Finally, Robine said Washington had converted the OAS into a court of law. The OAS, he added, is a forum for debate and discussion of political issues. Panama's representative to the OAS special session, Jose Maria Cabrera, said evidence offered by Eagelburger was nothing but "lies, fabrications and half-truths." He said the US was using the 31-nation organization as "a platform for a propaganda campaign against Panama." According to Notimex, after the session journalists told Eagelburger that his presentation did not contain anything new, despite rumors that the US government had discovered additional evidence on Noriega's alleged crimes. The deputy secretary said he had information he did not reveal during the presentation due to ethical reasons and to avoid transforming the OAS forum into a court. While denying any plans for military action to oust Noriega, unidentified US officials cited by the New York Times said it would be justified if he continued to give refuge to drug traffickers. (Basic data from AFP, 08/30/89; Notimex, 08/31/89; New York Times, 09/01/89)

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