Panama: On "tensions" Surrounding Installation Of Interim Government

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Aug. 30: The Panamanian government reiterated warnings about the potential for a US invasion on Sept. 1. In an interview with Notimex, Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter said more than 18,000 US military personnel under the US Southern Command are prepared for an invasion. After Sept. 1, he said, Washington "will escalate military pressure in search of a provocation...The US has not dismissed intervention" as a means to having its way with Panama. In practice, said Ritter, Panama has already been invaded by the US military. The number of US troops in Panama is far in excess of those justified under the 1977 Canal accords, said the minister. He added that the accords state that US military presence must decline over time, and that the only justification for such presence is for the protection, maintenance and defense of the Canal. Ritter said the US has used "silly excuses" to justify increments in its military presence in Panama. Originally, he said, there were close to 15,000 US soldiers in the country. Then, "they brought in 2,000 more to protect the 15,000, and nearly another 2,000 to protect the earlier 2,000," Pedro Lopez, commander of the Victoriano Lorenzo International Brigade, told the Copley News Service that brigade members were prepared to fight aggression from the US or the domestic opposition. He said that about 500 armed members of the brigade, along with 10,000 members of the government's paramilitary Dignity Battalions, would be on alert throughout Panama on Sept. 1 to quash "efforts to destabilize the new government." Copley said it was impossible to obtain independent confirmation of Lopez' remarks. Lopez, 37, is a national government employee. Lopez said hundreds of brigade members fought alongside the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua to oust dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979. Others have fought as guerrillas in Chile, Colombia and El Salvador, he said. Lopez said, "We decided to take up arms again only if our own country was in danger. We now feel that such danger is close at hand. Believe me, in the event of trouble, we are ready to shed our last drop of blood." The brigade was named for Victoriano Lorenzo, a rebel executed by Colombian troops in 1902, a year before Panama gained political independence. Founded in 1978, the brigade's first commander was Hugo Spadafora, a former deputy minister of health who later broke with Noriega over the general's alleged ties to drug traffickers. In 1985, Spadafora's decapitated corpse was discovered in Costa Rica near the Panamanian border. Lopez said, "I always respected Spadafora's ideas. But he was wrong about the general." At 1:38 p.m., a man apparently broadcasting from a clandestine transmitter interrupted a radio sportscast to shout that Noriega was "a coward and an assassin" who had brought "disaster and destruction" to Panama. "He must be decapitated, for the welfare of our children and the welfare of the country," he declared. The Justice Ministry said that a "great number" of radio stations in Panama have recently had their broadcasts interrupted by "pro-Yankee" government opponents who wish to "subvert public order." The government announced the arrest of several members of the opposition Christian Democratic Party on charges of planning sabotage activities, and increased security nationwide in anticipation of protests. Paramilitary groups organized into "national defense committees" trained at various sites in Panama City. Government agencies announced they were placing themselves in a state of alert. Aug. 31: Opposition leaders said they
did not plan any street protests Friday. (Basic data from Notimex, 08/30/89; AP, Copley News Service, 08/31/89)

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