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Panama's Provisional Government: Summary Of Developments, Reactions, Sept. 1-7

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Sept. 1: Former comptroller Francisco Rodriguez was sworn in as provisional president of Panama at a brief ceremony. He was appointed president by Panama's Council of State on Aug. 31. (See CAU 09/01/89, for coverage of selection process, descriptions of new president and vice president.) In a statement from the White House, President George Bush said: "The United States will not recognize any government installed by General Noriega. Our ambassador will not return, and we will not have any diplomatic contact with the Noriega regime...The United States will continue to take other steps, including the tightening of measures to deprive the illegal regime of funds that belong to the Panamanian people." Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to President Bush, told reporters that the US has decided not to impose new macro-economic sanctions against Panama, result of concern for Panamanians' welfare. Scowcroft was speaking aboard the aircraft carrying President Bush back to the summer White House in Kennebunkport, Maine. Scowcroft said current sanctions will be maintained, despite acknowledged ineffectiveness, "until Noriega is willing to acquiesce to the will of the Panamanian people...I wouldn't rule out escalation, but we don't have any specific plans." In April 1988 Washington froze Panamanian government assets in the US. The US government has also imposed trade sanctions and prohibited certain payments to Panama's government by US citizens and companies. US embassy officials in Panama City said Washington is compiling a list of companies and individuals associated with Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega for the purpose of prohibiting them from carrying out any business transactions with US citizens. US State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said embassy functions in Panama City would not change. Most diplomatic contacts with the Panamanian government had been phased out since President Eric Arturo Delvalle was deposed in February 1988. In May this year, when the government annulled elections, Washington recalled Ambassador Arthur Davis. Tutwiler added that there are no immediate plans for personnel changes at the embassy. The spokesperson pointed out that President Bush's statement did not mean a break in diplomatic relations with Panama, since the embassy will continue to function. Meanwhile, Panama will continue without diplomatic representation in the US. After Delvalle's ouster, his ambassador to the US, Juan Sosa, delivered custody of Panama's embassy and consulates in the US to the State Department. Until Sept. 1, Washington recognized Sosa as ambassador to the US. In response to Washington's decisions to deny recognition to the new government, and to cut off diplomatic relations, Rodriguez said in a nationwide broadcast on Friday night that "as an eminently peaceful people," Panamanians "have not been, nor do they want to be enemies of the American people." He called on the US government to recognize that its "policy of high-handedness" against Panama "does not respond, by any account, to the sensible and realistic execution of many of their interests that we accept and recognize." Rodriguez added, "I am sure there are many important interests of the United States that can be compatible with the national interests of Panama without undermining their prestige or sacrificing our dignity." Rodriguez asked for international solidarity, especially from Latin American governments, with "the Panamanian struggle against interventionism, imperialism and neocolonialism." The new president committed his administration to organizing
new elections and handing over power to elected civilians as soon as adequate conditions are in place. One of the conditions is "a guarantee that elections can be held without foreign interference and manipulation." Other conditions are the termination of US economic sanctions against Panama, and the return of about $300 million in Panamanian assets impounded by the US to the country's treasury. During a news conference transmitted via satellite to Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and Peru, Deputy Asst. Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Michael Kozak said the US had not discarded the option of military intervention in Panama. He added that this decision was in President Bush's hands. Kozak noted that Washington would not need to send troops to Panama since a large number of US soldiers are already stationed in that country. The official asserted that the Bush administration is committed to seeing Noriega punished under the law because in addition to his alleged stature as one of Central America's principal drug traffickers, he has protected Medellin cartel members and permitted the laundering of drug profits in Panama. Kozak said that Panama's problem is not the Canal, but rather a moral conflict brought about by Panamanians' desire to see the end of Gen. Noriega's dictatorship. Next, Kozak said that US military personnel are on the alert to prevent Noriega's aggression against persons charged with Canal maintenance. Such operations, he said, are "strategic." Costa Rica, Venezuela, Peru, Uruguay, Colombia, Brazil, Chile and Argentina have recalled their ambassadors to Panama. Rodriguez said none of the countries deciding to withdraw ambassadors have notified Panama of a break in relations. According to a statement by the Costa Rican Foreign Ministry, the government of President Oscar Arias has decided not to recognize Panama's provisional government. The new government was described as "unconstitutional." [On Aug. 31, Arias called on Latin American governments to recall their ambassadors to Panama as a gesture of protest. He said Costa Rican ambassador Jorge Emilio Regidor would not return to Panama City until Panama restores legal institutions. Arias asserted that Guillermo Endara, presidential candidate of the Civic Opposition Democratic Alliance (ADOC) in the annulled May elections, is Panama's legitimate president. Last week the Panamanian government said it had dismantled a group of Panamanians planning sabotage and destabilization. These actions were to be launched from the Costa Rican city of Neilly, located on the Panamanian-Costa Rican border.] Unidentified US officials cited by Copley News Service (09/02/89) said that another tactic against Noriega consists of an attempt to revoke the US citizenship of Orville Goodin, who served as finance minister under the administration of outgoing president Manuel Solis Palma. Born in Jamaica, Goodin became a naturalized US citizen before moving to Panama. The officials said Washington has initiated legal steps to revoke Goodin's US citizenship because of his service as a Panamanian government official. Sept. 2: Rodriguez met with leaders of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) and other officials to form a cabinet. In a statement issued in Paris, the European Economic Community said the administration in Panama is "without institutional legitimacy." It called for a solution that would allow the Panamanian people to choose their own government. Guillermo Ford, ADOC vice presidential candidate in the May elections, told Notimex that the opposition will not engage in dialogue with the provisional government. According to Ford, opposition militants are not closed to dialogue, but it would have to take place in the context of a legitimate government. After a meeting of the ADOC leadership, spokespersons said the Alliance had decided to launch a civil disobedience campaign on Sept. 4. The campaign will consist of street demonstrations and delaying payments to the government for light, water and telephone services, as well as tax and social security contributions. Spokespersons said they expected more than 600,000 citizens to participate. ADOC leaders said they had resolved not to purchase newspaper space or broadcast time on government media channels "to attack the dictatorship" that appointed Rodriguez president because "it was he who managed the military
regime's finances." Guillermo Endara criticized new US sanctions that will prohibit transactions by US citizens with Panamanian firms connected with Noriega or his "associates." He said this measure will serve only to "castigate" innocent employees and managers of more than 100 important Panamanian companies. Sept. 3: Rodriguez announced that six of the 11-member cabinet under Solis Palma would continue in their posts. They are Orville Goodin, Finance and Treasury; Juan Bosco Bernal, Education; Jose Renan Esquivel, Health; Elmo Martinez Blanco, Commerce and Industry; Darian Ayala, Agricultural Development; and, Gustavo R. Gonzalez, Economic Policy and Planning. Five new ministers announced by Rodriguez follow: Olmedo Miranda, Government and Justice; Hidalgo Fung, Public Works; George Fishel, Labor and Social Welfare; Arturo Diez, Housing; and, Augusto Valderrama, Presidency. The provisional government will appoint a 41-member legislative commission to replace the assembly, whose term also expired Sept. 1. Sept. 4: About 100 people shouting "Down with Noriega!" gathered outside the Christ the King Roman Catholic Church. ADOC leader Endara urged them to participate in civil disobedience. Government and Justice Minister Olmedo Miranda announced strict prohibitions against all public demonstrations. Organization of American States Secretary General Joao Baena Soares said member-nations had not adopted any type of collective decision to isolate Panama. In Belgrade, Yugoslavia, Panama's new vice president, Carlos Ozores, told a press conference that prospects for resolving the Panamanian political crisis do not look good as long as the US continues its policy of aggression, much less resorts to force. Ozores was acting as chief of Panama's delegation at the Non-Aligned Movement summit. The US Embassy in Panama released a list of 152 names, including all members of the cabinet and the 14 members of the Panamanian Defense Forces Strategic Command. Embassy officials told reporters that US companies and government agencies are forbidden from making purchases from individuals on the blacklist or their companies. US government agencies in Panama spend almost $900 million on goods and services in Panama. The measure will affect millions paid by the US Southern Command and the Panama Canal Commission to companies on the list for goods and services. The officials said they plan to release a list of companies owned by Noriega or his close associates within days. Sept. 5: In an interview with Notimex, Gen. Noriega requested support from Latin America to construct a new republic, and "respect for this country as a sovereign people." He was interviewed after meeting with a US delegation of Vietnam war veterans. Noriega said the US veterans had a genuine concept of war, "which is a matter of life and death." He added that the delegation was visiting Panama to collect information about "our ambitions and potential...as a threat to the United States." The general said the US veterans can provide symbolic support, but "what we need is for the world to know the truth" of what goes on in Panama. The real struggle in Panama, he added, is against hunger and underdevelopment. According to Noriega, the provisional government has given the opposition the opportunity to participate in dialogue, but instead opposition leaders are waiting for the United States for orders, and to deliver the government to them. Philip Jones, spokesperson for the seven Vietnam veterans, said their visit to Panama was in the interest of peace. He said the group traveled to Panama to investigate the domestic situation in light of possible US intervention. Jones said the delegation would inform other veterans and the US public of their findings. In statements released in Panama City, the European Economic Community, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Peru, Barbados, Venezuela and Guatemala said they would not recognize the provisional government and had recalled their ambassadors. The above Latin American governments criticized the "apathy and lack of interest" by some Latin American nations who did not articulate a strong position on Panama at the most recent special session of the OAS. Sept. 6: Interim Foreign Minister Gustavo Gonzalez said Panama is drafting a new foreign policy aimed at countering US-inspired efforts to diplomatically isolate the country. The "long
arm" of the US has put pressure on other countries to distance themselves from Panama, he said. Gonzalez, former minister of planning and economy, named an eight-member commission on Sept. 4 to restructure foreign policy and to recommend actions to counter condemnation by some countries opposed to the newly named provisional government. Along with the US, a number of European nations, as well as Japan, Israel and several Latin American nations have registered their displeasure with the appointment of Francisco Rodriguez as provisional president. The commission has been asked to elaborate a strategy to smooth over relations with many nations, "especially those in the European Economic Community," Gonzalez said. He added that the foreign ministry is also "anxiously awaiting" the reaction from some Latin American countries that have not yet stated their position on the Panamanian situation. Sept. 7: At a ceremony marking the 12th anniversary of the signing of the Torrijos-Carter Canal treaty, President Rodriguez reiterated that the US has violated the 1977 accords. Washington's actions on Sept. 1 and after, he said, represent an escalation of intimidation and violence against Panamanian territory. Rodriguez said Panama has continually demonstrated its willingness to abide by the 1977 accords. He added that the accords, aimed at maintaining efficient and open access to inter-oceanic transit, have been responsibly observed by Panama. (Basic data from AFP, 09/01/89, 09/06/89; New York Times, 09/02/89; AP, 09/02/89, 09/04/89; Copley News Service, 09/02/89; Xinhua, 09/02/89, 09/04/89, 09/07/89; Notimex, 09/02-05/89, 09/07/89)

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