10-11-1989

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Deborah Tyroler

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Panama Attempted Coup Aftermath: Summary Of Events & Statements, Part 1
by Deborah Tyroler
Category/Department: General
Published: Wednesday, October 11, 1989

[See CAU 10/04/89, 10/06/89 for summary of events surrounding Oct. 3 attempted coup, and subsequent developments.] Oct. 4: In San Diego, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias said the failed coup "won't be the last" such effort to depose Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Arias said that he preferred diplomatic pressure rather than military action to oust Noriega and restore democracy to Panama. The president's comments were made at the Institute of the Americas. He later received the institute's "Award for Democracy and Peace." On Wednesday evening, the Panamanian government announced that three colonels had been arrested: Guillermo Wong, chief of the G2 secret police; Julio Ow Young; and, Armando Palacios. The announcement also said attempted coup leader Maj. Moises Giroldi and nine other rebels had been killed. Oct. 5: White House Chief of Staff John Sununu ordered a study of how the Panama coup was handled. Salvos of criticism between some congresspersons and the administration continued. Unidentified administration officials told the New York Times that it was now accepted that Noriega was held prisoner by the rebels for between two and four hours. In Panama, Noriega said he persuaded his captors to release him when it was apparent that the coup was failing. Administration officials cited by the Times said US Army troops in Panama had moved at the request of the rebels to block two routes that the rebels believed would be used by forces loyal to the general. In earlier reports of the roadblocks, US officials had said the intention was to protect US lives and property. The officials said the roadblock failed because a third road eventually used by Noriega's loyal troops was not blocked. In an interview with the Times, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said the White House had "made a conscious decision" not to confront the Noriega forces actively because officials in Washington did not see any circumstances under which they could have seized the general without going to war with a faction of the Panamanian Defense Forces. An unidentified administration official told the Times that the rebels had told military officers in the Army's Southern Command that they "won't" turn Noreiga over to the US. This was accurately relayed to Pentagon officials in Washington. Meanwhile, the US Southern Command informed the US embassy in Panama of the same, which was misunderstood as the rebels suggesting that they "want" to turn Noriega over. The misinterpreted message from the rebels was reportedly received by the State Department and CIA simultaneously, prompting the State Department to call a hurried meeting with government lawyers to consider such a step. Minutes later the coup collapsed. A few hours later, CIA representatives were in Congress briefing members of the Congressional Intelligence committees with the agency's version of events, which was that the rebels were prepared to hand over Noriega. The Times also cited unidentified officials as saying that the coup leaders' plan was to declare a coup and then wait to see how many units rallied to each side. The rebels' plan did not include Noriega's capture, said an official cited by the Times. Nonetheless, said the official, the rebels "fortuitously" seized him in the Defense Forces headquarters and held him for several hours. Spokesperson for Noriega, Maj. Edgardo Lopez, said that the general had been tipped off by an alarm bell set off by a supporter as he parked his car in his military headquarters grounds on Tuesday morning. Lopez said Lt. Jorge Bonilla of the Urraca battalion had tried to kill Noriega but failed. He said Bonilla was killed in the ensuing battle.
Lopez told a US reporter: "There was a lot of money involved in this coup. We found a briefcase full of cash that belonged to one of the rebels...My General (Noriega) was not armed, nor was he wearing a bulletproof vest." Oct. 6: In a letter published in government newspaper Critica, unnamed "nationalist" businesspersons offered $250,000 to assassins who kill six "traitors," including former president Eric Arturo Delvalle and Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera, a former top commander who was among the first to accuse Noriega of drug trafficking. The letter was addressed to daily columnist Balatazar Renan Aizprua. The money, said the letter, had been deposited in a Swiss account. According to the offer: "They (opponents) have allowed a price to be put on (Noriega's) head, with dollars given to them by the United States...[Therefore,] we consider it justified to use our money to pay those who execute traitors." The Revolutionary Democratic Party declared support for proposed emergency or "war" laws aimed at public employees who do not support the government. Party official Rigoberto Parades said, "All of those we can detect we are going to fire." Noriega and his supporters were incensed at reports that some public employees began celebrating Tuesday when rebels temporarily took over the Defense Forces headquarters. The emergency legislation package is also to include more rigorous sanctions for "foreign agents," or persons working in Panama serving foreign governments or organizations and not accredited with those governments' embassies. In a statement, the Civil Democratic Opposition Alliance (ADOC) said that the government had launched a new phase of persecution. As a result, ADOC had decided to delay the return to Panama of vice presidential candidate in the annulled May elections, Guillermo Ford. Next, Ricardo Arias Calderon, also a vice presidential candidate in May, was reportedly in hiding. In a report published Oct. 6, Copley News Service cited US sources in Panama who said that US officials encouraged and gave indirect support to Maj. Giroldi, but abandoned him during the coup attempt. The sources requested anonymity. The sources said Giroldi had first informed US officials of his intentions in mid-September, and confirmed his plans at a secret meeting with two CIA agents on the evening of Oct. 1. The agents were told that Giroldi’s decision to go forward with the coup had been prompted by what the major called the Noriega's irrational behavior during a cocktail party earlier that day. "He told officers they should shoot down US planes, a dangerous statement since some are disposed to take him literally," Giroldi told the CIA agents, according to the US sources. The sources said that on the following day Panamanian troops fired small arms at a small US reconnaissance plane but did not hit it. Next, the sources said senior US officials in Panama encouraged Giroldi to go ahead and promised him indirect support in the form of blocking roads and a bridge to slow down deployment of loyalist troops. Later, the US forces permitted the Noriega troops passage since Washington had reportedly decided not to directly influence the outcome. This decision reportedly doomed Giroldi, who was surrounded, forced to surrender and later executed by loyalists, said the sources, who insisted they not be identified. Giroldi’s wife was used as his first secret liaison with the CIA. Prior to the coup attempt, she took refuge in a US military base before the coup. US sources said other rebel officers had not taken the same precaution and Noriega may have ordered some of their family members captured and held hostage to negotiate his release. Some Panamanian political analysts said they believed the US had deliberately lifted its road and bridge blockade during the coup attempt, to allow pro-Noriega forces passage in the hope of creating a face-off between pro- and anti-Noriega forces. According to Jose Stoute of the Center for Latin American Studies, a Panamanian think tank, "A situation of split power would have legitimized US intervention." (cont.)