

8-30-1989

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Recommended Citation

Neagle, John. "Panama: Warnings Of U.S. Invasion, Arrival Of U.S.-backed Mercenary Force." (1989).
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Panama: Warnings Of U.S. Invasion, Arrival Of U.S.-backed Mercenary Force

by John Neagle

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, August 30, 1989

In statements to reporters on Aug. 26, Panamanian Foreign Minister Jorge Ritter said there is a "true danger" of a US invasion to oust Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. He said the US has used military maneuvers allowed under the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties to shield its preparations. The minister added, "If all the preliminary steps to an invasion have been taken, the only thing left is the definitive step." On Aug. 28, a statement by the Revolutionary Panamenista Party (PPR) carried by local newspapers said "intelligence sources" had reported that 400 Nicaraguan contras and members of Nicaragua's Christian Democratic Party had been trained for guerrilla activities inside Panama. "They are ready...to take over radio and television stations, to occupy public buildings and to launch powerful grenades and Molotov cocktails," said the PPR. The mercenaries, said the PPR, would have entered Panama at Howard air base, about 13 km. southwest of the capital. The PPR said the 12,000 soldiers under the US Southern Command's 12,000 personnel were to execute a "siege of the capital," broadcasting anti-Noriega propaganda. Next, the report said that Radio Impacto in Costa Rica, which is linked to the Nicaraguan contras, would participate in a plan by the Bush administration to jam Panamanian broadcasts. In the past several weeks, clandestine radio broadcasts have carried statements criticizing Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Ricardo Arias, head of the Civic Democratic Opposition Alliance (ADOC), told journalists that the PPR report was the product of "mentally disturbed" people, and that it was intended to create "an environment to repress" the opposition. US Southern Command spokesperson Mercedes Morris dismissed the report as misinformation by the Panamanian government. "No contra rebel has come here," she said. In Washington, the State Department also dismissed the report, saying it "sounds like more Noriega disinformation." (Basic data from AP, 08/26/89; AFP, Xinhua, 08/28/89)

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