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## **Panama: Gen. Noriega Becomes Official Head Of Government**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

*Category/Department: General*

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On Dec. 15, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega will become the official head of government and is to retain power until US "aggression" against the country ends, Vice President Carlos Ozores confirmed Thursday. Ozores told the Agence France-Presse Gen. Noriega would be named "chief of government" in a vote by the National Assembly, which began meeting Dec. 14. "Facing an abnormal situation of undeclared war by the United States, we must take this valiant decision," he said, adding that Gen. Noriega would remain as supreme political and military leader until "U.S. aggression ends." Gen. Noriega "is not going to be the symbolic chief of government, but a leader with all the tools to make rectifications and continue the fight for national liberation," Ramon Ashby, president of the National Union of Natural Leaders (UNDINA), said in a statement Dec. 13. The assembly conferred the same title and extraordinary powers on Gen. Omar Torrijos in 1972 to allow him to negotiate the canal treaty with the US. The treaty was signed in 1977. Legislators, pro-government organizations and unions proposed giving Gen. Noriega the title one month ago, saying the position would allow him to negotiate with the US on matters affecting the jointly run Panama Canal. Panama's provisional president, Francisco Rodriguez, is due to give up his post in March. The assembly, whose membership is entirely pro-Noriega, was formed from 510 mayors and county chairmen nationwide to replace the National Assembly, whose mandate expired Sept. 1. Among the issues of the two-day meeting is naming Noriega as Panama's chief of government with powers greater than those of Rodriguez. Talking to journalists before delivering his speech to lawmakers, Rodriguez praised Noriega as a man who "had all the qualities for becoming chief of government." "It is evident now that the true intention of the US in its campaigning in favor of a supposed democracy...is a war against all Panamanians, against the government and against the opposition, and against those who are not aligned with a political group," Rodriguez said in his speech. "The United States does not care even about the political groups that have represented its political and economic interests here. It is not Noriega they want to do away with, but our national ability to be independent," he said. Also on Thursday, the Foreign Ministry said it agreed to a request by European Economic Community ambassadors for the release of a group of civilian political prisoners. Acting Foreign Minister Abelardo Carles said the Panamanian government will have a "a positive answer." French ambassador Jacques Rummelhardt said the request was made "in the spirit of the Christmas season." The government did not say how many or who would be freed. (Basic data from AFP, AP, 12/14/89; Notimex, 12/13/89)

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