

12-20-1989

U.S. Military Action Against Panama: Summary Of Events & Statements

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "U.S. Military Action Against Panama: Summary Of Events & Statements." (1989).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/3616>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

U.S. Military Action Against Panama: Summary Of Events & Statements

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, December 20, 1989

At about midnight local time, US military forces supported by helicopters, fighter jets and tanks launched a simultaneous attack against the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) headquarters in Panama City and other military installations and targets throughout the country. According to AP, mortar, machine-gun and cannon fire was heard in the capital, and planes and helicopters were flying over the city. Gunfire was heard near the US base Fort Clayton, six miles away. An AP correspondent reported seeing 24 US tanks moving in the direction of the PDF headquarters. Channel 8, television station of the US Southern Command, issued an Echo level alert. The announcement said movement by unauthorized US personnel was prohibited. At about 1:30 a.m. EST, NBC TV reported that US forces had launched a military operation in Panama, apparently to oust Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. Panamanian intelligence officers and nearby residents said US Galaxy and Hercules 130 aircraft both capable of carrying large numbers of paratroops had been observed since Monday over US bases. An additional 9,500 troops from US bases were flown in to support the 12,000 stationed in Panama. At a press briefing in Washington at about 1:30 a.m. EST, White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said Guillermo Endara was "sworn in" as president of Panama at midnight. He did not specify the persons officiating at the ceremony, nor where it took place. Notimex reported that the swearing-in occurred in Costa Rica one hour before the military operation commenced. Other sources suggested that Endara and his two vice presidents, Guillermo Ford and Ricardo Arias Calderon, were invested inside a US base in Panama, probably Fort Clayton. The Bush administration claimed the right to intervene to protect the lives of US citizens, safeguard the Panama Canal treaties, and bring Gen. Noriega to the US for trial on charges of drug trafficking. Fitzwater said the killing Saturday of a US officer by Panamanian soldiers constituted a "pattern of hostility" that led the administration to conclude that the lives of US citizens in Panama were in danger. CIA director William Webster told congressional leaders that the US military action had been well-organized and meticulously planned during the previous three months. He telephoned the congresspersons about an hour before the attack began. AP and AFP reports said that witnesses reported the PDF headquarters was in flames at 12:40 a.m., and virtually destroyed by 2 a.m. Fighting was also reported at a Panamanian cavalry unit about seven miles east of the PDF headquarters, and at the Panamanian base Fort Cimarron, about 20 miles from Panama City. The Panama Canal was closed to traffic at 1 a.m. local time. At about 2 a.m. local time, the Panamanian government's Radio Nacional called on doctors and nurses to attend "hundreds of wounded." The radio station reported that for the previous two hours, US troops had been carrying out an invasion "as was predicted," and that PDF troops and civilian militias known as the Dignity Battalions had engaged the enemy. Notimex monitored a radio broadcast from Panama during which Endara called on the PDF to surrender peacefully, and accept him as the winner of the May 7 presidential election. Notimex cited unidentified witnesses who said US troops were fighting civilians, PDF soldiers and Dignity Battalion members in the San Miguelito and El Chorrillo neighborhoods before dawn. Members of the PDF's elite Machos de Monte unit said their barracks on the outskirts of the capital was also attacked by US soldiers. Early Wednesday, joint chiefs of staff

chairman Gen. Colin Powell said that nine US soldiers had been killed in action, 39 were wounded and one was missing. After dawn, Noriega's main bodyguard, Lt. Asuncion Gaitan, spoke on Radio Nacional to say that Noriega was "well and in a safe place." Gaitan then read a series of messages using code names and instructions. At about the same time, Dr. Marcel Pena of the Santo Tomas Hospital in Panama City told AP that wounded had been coming in all night and the number had increased after daybreak. He said, "There are many more than 50 dead and an enormous number of wounded." A man identified only as Major Caballero said on Radio Nacional that Noriega loyalists were holding 41 US citizens hostage. He said that many of them had been caught in rented cars in Panama City. AP said it could not confirm the report. About 30 minutes after the attack was underway, troops in olive-green uniforms ran through the luxury Marriott Hotel and lights in the hotel went out. Early Wednesday morning, NBC and AP reported that Panamanian soldiers were holding hostage an indeterminate number of US citizens and other foreigners in the Marriott Hotel. NBC TV reported that a CBS producer and an ABC producer were taken away from the Marriott Hotel in Panama City at about 9:30 a.m. by plainclothes policemen carrying weapons. In broadcasts over television channel 2, seized by US troops at 1:30 a.m., the US Southern Command called on members of the PDR to not permit themselves to be manipulated by Gen. Noriega. The Panamanian soldiers were told that the time for action had come, and that the US has every intention to fulfill its commitments under the Canal treaties. Noriega's followers were described as a tiny group of criminals. TV station owner is Carlos Duque, pro-government presidential candidate in the May election. US charges d'affaires John Bushnell told reporters at Fort Clayton that he had notified Endara, Ford and Arias Calderon of the US military operation late Tuesday, and that the three men approved of the action in a letter to President Bush. Copies of a videotape of the three taking respective oaths of office were provided to a group of Washington-based reporters who were shuttled to Fort Clayton. Bushnell said the ceremony was witnessed by two officials of Panama's human rights association. Bushnell said the three Panamanian leaders were currently in hiding, and hope to assume official duties once the fighting is over. A businessperson who requested anonymity told CNN that one of his associates saw Gen. Noriega and a detachment of soldiers on Tuesday at El Cope, located about 30 km. from the principal highway leading from Panama to Costa Rica. He also told CNN that areas of Panama City's commercial district were damaged in the fighting, and that many stores had been looted. According to AP, fighting in the capital continued into mid-morning before Panamanian resistance was quashed. Xinhua reported that by mid-morning the capital city, the Panamanian Rio Hato military base (200 km. from Panama City), and the city of Colon were under US military control. Both the domestic and international airports close to the capital were occupied by US troops before dawn. (Basic data from numerous reports by Notimex, AP, AFP, DPA, Xinhua, 12/20/89)

-- End --