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Deborah Tyroler

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Developments In Panama Prior To U.S. Military Attack: Dec. 15-dec. 19

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 15: Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega was named "chief of government" with unlimited powers by the National Assembly to confront a "state of war" with the US due to Washington's economic sanctions. In a speech following the Assembly resolution, Noriega said the US had imposed on Panama a "state of war using psychological aggression and intimidation." The resolution gave Noriega power to appoint public officials, control foreign relations, convene the assembly and "make decisions on whatever other matter or unforeseen circumstance" affects the nation's interests. A US military helicopter circled over the assembly building for about an hour while the legislature was in session. Provisional President Francisco Rodriguez was expected to remain in the ceremonial post. Dec. 16: On Saturday evening, a US soldier was fatally shot in an incident outside the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) headquarters. US Southern Command spokesperson Col. Ronald Sconyers said four soldiers in civilian clothes were stopped by about 40 civilians and five Panamanian soldiers as they were driving by the headquarters at 9:05 p.m. The US officers were in the area, he said, because they made a wrong turn and were lost. According to Sconyers, the crowd tried to pull them out of the car, and as the soldiers drove off shots were fired at the car, wounding one of the US soldiers. He said the other US servicemen were not injured. The wounded man was taken to the US military's Gorgas Hospital where he died, Sconyers said. The television channel of the US Southern Command announced that a "Delta" alert was in effect, restricting US military personnel to bases. Dec. 17: In a communique, the PDF accused US officers of provocation. Referring to the incident on Saturday night, the communique said the US officers had "broken through checkpoints and fired at the headquarters building, wounding a soldier and two civilians, including a one-year-old girl." Soldiers in combat gear surrounded US military bases near Panama City. Panamanian soldiers used trucks and buses to block streets leading to Gen. Noriega's headquarters. Dec. 18: Panamanian officer Castrejon Garcia told reporters that Col. Robert Perry, US representative on the joint Canal defense and security commission, had accused the PDF of beating a "Navy couple" who witnessed the Saturday night incident. Garcia said that the couple was reportedly walking in the vicinity of the PDF headquarters at precisely the time when the incident involving the four US officers occurred. He added that Panamanian soldiers had absolutely nothing to do with torture or any other form of aggression against the couple. Next, Garcia said, "In an arrogant and disrespectful way Col. Perry threatened me with armed invasion" of Panama. In an incident which took place on a street near the Southern Command headquarters in western Panama City, a US officer shot a Panamanian traffic cop in the arm. According to a statement by the US Southern Command, the US officer involved was leaving a laundry when the policeman motioned to him to stop and approached him. The Command said the policeman appeared to reach for a gun. The statement said, "The American responded defensively by pulling a weapon and fired two shots...The Panamanian went down, then got up and left the scene." On Monday night, the Panamanian Defense Forces press office issued a statement on the incident, describing it as evidence of "ever more reckless aggression," and accused US officials of twisting the facts in the case. The communique said the US officer was traveling in a vehicle that "never stopped and on

the contrary, accelerated." One of the two shots hit Police Cpl. Cesar Tejada in the left forearm, said the statement. At a news conference, Lt.Col. Arnulfo Castrejon said US and Panamanian forces were holding a "dialogue" on the Saturday night incident by messenger. He said US Army South commander Gen. Marck Cisneros had threatened an invasion. Castrejon summarized one message as saying that Cisneros "demanded an explanation; if not, they would invade." In an interview, President Bush described the killing of the US soldier as "an enormous outrage." He said the US was reviewing options for response, and did not rule out military action. Panamanian Foreign Minister Leonardo Kam told reporters the encounter Saturday was a "hostile act...an act of aggression perpetrated by the US armed forces. I consider it a grave escalation of the US permanent policy of harassment." Dec. 19: The government-run newspaper Critica called the incidents of Saturday and Monday "epileptic arrogance" by the US, and denounced the "cynicism to blame the Defense Forces for the criminal actions of Saturday when four US soldiers fired on civilians and defenseless women." The Panamanian government accused the US military of violating the nation's air space with "observation planes and helicopters" in preparation for military action. Civil aviation director Lt. Pascual Gonzalez told AP, "We think the level of aggression and intimidation will increase. There are helicopters flying during the night over our installations." NBC News broadcast segments Tuesday evening showing what it said were C-141 Starlifter transports landing in Panama in the afternoon. An AP reporter drove through Howard Air Force Base Tuesday night and saw at least 10 large transport planes, an unusually high number. A Southern Command spokesperson said earlier Tuesday "no unusual military activity" was taking place. Later he said he knew nothing about the reported arrival of C-141 planes. At Fort Clayton, headquarters of the US Army South, tanks were pulled into a circle in an open area, and trucks and armored personnel carriers were moved into public view. Telephone lines to the Southern Command offices at Quarry Heights and to officers' homes were busy late Tuesday. Earlier Tuesday, C-141 transport planes were seen in the air around Fort Bragg, NC, home base of the Army's 82nd Airborne division. At that time, according to AP, "It was not known if they were connected to any US military activity in Panama." In Washington, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler said Gen. Noriega's declaration last week that a state of war existed with the United States, followed by "indiscriminate and unprovoked violence against Americans, clearly increases tensions in Panama...We find the unwarranted use of violence against Americans by the Noriega regime unacceptable." She said Washington would not "rule out any options" in determining how to respond. Police Cpl. Cesar Tejada told journalists permitted to interview him in a hospital Tuesday the American had initiated the incident. "I was merely standing there, doing my job, when this car went by at high speed and the driver fired two shots at me," he said. "I never gave him a reason for it." [Late Tuesday, a New York Times reporter and a Reuters reporter were detained for about an hour by US military police when they tried to enter Howard air base to determine whether US forces were landing. The Times reporter's notebooks were confiscated by the US Army, the Times said in New York, and the two reporters were released without incident.] (Basic data from Notimex, 12/17/89, 12/19/89; AP, 12/15/89, 12/16/89, 12/18/89, 12/19/89; AFP, 12/15/89, 12/16/89, 12/18/89, 12/19/89; DPA, 12/18/89; Xinhua, 12/18/89, 12/19/89)

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