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Update On U.S. Military Invasion Of Panama

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 20: According to Secretary of State James Baker, President Bush decided Sunday to invade Panama after receiving intelligence reports that Gen. Noriega was planning commando attacks on a US residential neighborhood in Panama City. He said the unconfirmed reports pointed to a "grave danger" to the 35,000 Americans living in Panama and that "there was more risk...from inaction than there was from action." Referring to Noriega, Baker said, "If he killed or terrorized a dozen American families you would be asking today why we didn't act." In a casualty report, the Pentagon said at least 11 US soldiers had died in the invasion, 59 were wounded and one was missing. Pentagon officials said there were unconfirmed reports that a female civilian was among the US wounded. * Roger Conner, a spokesperson for the Maryland-based Marriott Corp., said Panamanian troops removed several civilians from the Panama Marriott Caesar Park Hotel. About 170 guests were staying at the hotel when Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) troops entered the facility. Marriott Corp. manages the hotel owned by the Japanese firm Aoki Construction Inc. Conner said the captives included journalists and several employees. Civilian sources in Panama said earlier that six US citizens and four Frenchmen and several journalists had been taken hostage at the hotel by Panamanian troops after the fighting began. John Quinones, an NBC correspondent, said that 100 journalists were trapped in the Marriott Hotel as gunmen loyal to Gen. Noriega roamed the streets outside. According to AP, 12 foreigners, including eight US citizens, were taken from the hotel by Panamanians armed with assault rifles and held for about two hours before being released unharmed in the streets. Among them were correspondents for The Associated Press, Reuters and The New York Times. * According to AFP, chaos reigned in Panama City as US troops fought loyalist Panamanian forces and looters sacked dozens of stores. Ten hours after the surprise attack, gunfights and artillery explosions continued in parts of the city. Shops in the downtown commercial district were looted. Thousands of residents fled the city on foot in the absence of public transportation. In San Miguelito, residents said that US and Panamanian forces were fighting at close range. US troops and about 10 tanks were deployed around the barricaded US Embassy while about 300 meters away some 200 members of Dignity Battalions guarded Santo Tomas hospital. US planes, which bombed the PDF headquarters early Wednesday morning, also hit some nearby houses, causing numerous civilian casualties, residents said. After the attack on the PDF headquarters, US troops took up positions along July 4 Avenue, which divides the canal zone from the rest of the city. Witnesses said a US helicopter was downed by PDF anti-aircraft fire in the Caballeria district, and that another went down early Wednesday in Amador Cemetery, near the PDF headquarters. The major battles appeared to be in the San Miguelito neighborhood to the northeast, where US jets bombed and helicopters strafed a PDF barracks, and in Old Panama, site of the colonial capital, where Panama's Defense Forces have a military base. By 4 p.m., the fighting appeared to have ended as Panamanian forces withdrew. * Surrounded by hundreds of pro-Noriega forces at the Foreign Ministry, provisional president Francisco Rodriguez told reporters that Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega was personally directing from "some spot in Panama the resistance efforts...Panama is living through a decisive moment in its history. The people are resisting and will continue to resist until the aggression is over and the Yankee soldiers, who have murdered Panamanian people, leave." Rodriguez told journalists that the death toll for Panamanians thus far

was at least 60. Unofficial sources said it had surpassed 200. * Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said 9,500 US troops had been sent overnight to support the 13,000 troops based in Panama. He said another 2,000 would be arriving Wednesday. Powell said battalions of the US Army's elite Special Forces were simultaneously parachuted into Panama City International Airport, the PDF headquarters, and the headquarters of two key units on the outskirts of the capital and neutralized those facilities, said Powell. The prison at Gamboa, that housed many of the PDF soldiers jailed after the October coup attempt and many other "happy prisoners" were released, he said. The general said US forces immobilized Panama's small fleets of naval vessels and military aircraft during the invasion. * In an interview with Costa Rican Radio Impacto on Wednesday, Endara said the US had no other choice but to invade Panama. "It has been a painful act because Panamanians have been killed or wounded, but we had to rid ourselves of this infamous regime," Endara said in the telephone interview from an unidentified location. Endara said he had formed his cabinet but could not communicate with all its members to confirm the appointments. He said he had named Eduardo Vallarino as his representative to the United Nations and Lawrence Chewing Fabrega as his envoy to the Organization of American States (OAS). Endara said he had been in contact with several foreign leaders to discuss steps to "rebuild the Panamanian economy, which has been destroyed by the dictatorship." Referring to US aid to the Panamanian people, he noted: "The North American brothers have been the fathers of the democracy which now begins in Panama." Describing the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) as "honest professionals," he said his government was prepared to "work with them and respect their acquired rights." * White House spokesperson Roman Popadiuk said the US had offered a \$1 million reward for information leading to the capture of Manuel Antonio Noriega, and \$150 for each gun turned in by pro-Noriega forces in Panama. * In a clandestine radio broadcast aired over Radio Nacional, Noriega called for international military aid to repel the US invasion. Noriega said, "We call on the world for material help in the form of troops...Our slogan is to conquer or die; not one step backward...I congratulate the (Panamanian) Defense Forces for resisting. We must resist and move ahead. (We must) must go on with the strides of winners." Shortly after Noriega's statement was broadcast, the government-run Radio Nacional went off the air at 4:50 p.m. The radio station was attacked by US forces, ending Noriega supporters' statements and military messages. Previously, US troops had gained control of all other radio and television stations in Panama. * President Bush ordered that economic and political sanctions be lifted and authorized federal drug agents to pursue arrests in Panama. * According to a press pool report by Reuters and AP, US citizens Mary Rebhan, 24, of Hollywood, Fla., and Tara King, 25, of Dallas, were held at gunpoint for more than six hours at the Omar Torrijos International Airport before they were released by US soldiers who reportedly bluffed the Panamanian captors into believing that Gen. Noriega had been killed. * Unidentified Central American sources cited by Notimex said US troops had gained control of all Panamanian military barracks and bases in Panama City, but did not control bases outside the capital. Because the US troops "didn't know what to do" after apparently letting Noriega slip out of the city during the pre-dawn attack, the US forces would likely attempt to occupy the entire country to find the general. * Members of the 82nd Airborne Division arrived at the Marriott at 11:22 p.m. EST to evacuate the 30 or 40 people trapped inside. The division's arrival was preceded by air cover and light arms fire. * In Washington, the Smithsonian Institution said 11 scientists and technicians associated with the its Tropical Research Institute in Panama were missing and believed abducted. Dec. 21: US troops surrounded the Nicaraguan and Cuban embassies after rumors spread that Gen. Noriega may have sought refuge there. The Nicaraguan government immediately announced that its military forces would surround the US Embassy in Managua until the siege on its embassy ended. Five tanks and

eight armored cars were sent to the US Embassy in what Foreign Minister Miguel d'Escoto said was a response to the US Army's action in Panama City. D'Escoto told a news conference: "We have ordered exactly that the same thing be done here, around the US Embassy, as was done in Panama City." He said he was holding the US responsible for the safety of Nicaraguan diplomats, women and children at the embassy in that country. In Washington, Lt.Gen. Tom Kelly, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a press conference that the diplomatic missions were not surrounded, but were merely being watched for signs of Noriega. In Managua, the government-run Voice of Nicaragua reported that the Nicaraguan Embassy in Panama City "was surrounded by US troops and could be invaded at any moment...Unable to complete its objectives, the Yankees are looking to punish the people in solidarity" with Panama, the radio said. * The Panama Canal was reopened Thursday. * Heavy fighting was reported in San Miguelito just before dawn. US A-37 planes and Cobra helicopters carried out bombing runs after warning residents by loudspeaker to evacuate the area. By daybreak Thursday, the fighting had reportedly ceased, and US troops patrolled the streets. Many Panamanians began looting shops once more. According to AP, there was no evidence US troops were trying to halt the looting on Thursday morning. According to an AP report, chaos ruled the streets in Panama City again, amid looting and the takeover of some neighborhoods by Noriega supporters. Scattered bursts of gunfire came from the poor neighborhood of San Miguelito and from a central hotel district taken over temporarily by civilian "Dignity Battalions." * US-installed president of Panama, Guillermo Endara, was accompanied by US soldiers to the legislative assembly building where he declared himself president and announced a curfew beginning immediately until 6 a.m. Friday to try to control the situation. The announcement of the curfew was Endara's first official act as president. * At US checkpoints, soldiers inspected identifications closely. Hundreds of Panamanians had been detained at one point or another, but it was unclear what was happening to them and whether any were being held. * Pentagon officials said US troops had control of the capital. They said most PDF units had fled into the jungles, and that US troops may be ordered in to follow them. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said in a TV interview that reinforcements sent to aid the troops based in Panama may be able to leave "within a few weeks." Earlier, officials said they hoped the action could take three days. * Spanish photographer Juan Antonio Rodriguez, 32, was killed and an English photographer was injured during a cross fire between US troops who reportedly mistook each other for Panamanian forces in the Marriott Hotel parking lot. Circumstances surrounding this incident were not clear from reports by AP, AFP and Notimex. * President Bush said the military operation he ordered created a stable environment in Panama and said "it's been worth" the US lives it has cost. He declared the operation "pretty well wrapped up." * US officials said 19 US citizens were killed, 117 wounded and one missing in the two days of fighting. Officials at military hospitals in San Antonio, Texas, said they were treating about 190 wounded troops evacuated from Panama. Defense Department spokesperson Pete Williams said 59 Panamanian soldiers had been killed and 66 wounded, and that 1,500 prisoners had been taken by US soldiers in the first 36 hours of combat. According to DPA, reporters in Panama City put the death toll at anywhere from 500 to 1,000. * According to Spanish-speaking Israelis who telephoned the Panamanian Embassy in Jerusalem, Noriega and his Israeli adviser Mike Harari are in hiding on the island of Contadora in the Gulf of Panama not far from Panama City. AFP reported that Harari, a former ranking officer of the Israeli Mossad security service, is said to have organized Noriega's secret police and personal guard. Juan Antonio Rodriguez, 32, worked for the Madrid newspaper El Pais. Witnesses said Rodriguez was shot outside the Marriott Hotel when US troops fired on a group of journalists after the journalists had identified themselves. * AFP reported that US troops are holding 800 men and youths they took prisoner at a secondary school that is also serving as refuge

center for 2,000 Panamanians. Witnesses told AFP Thursday that US forces attacked Farrallon, a fishing village about 60 km. northwest of the capital where the General Tomas Herrera Institute, a military training academy, is located, on Wednesday. Later, US forces moved in and rounded up residents, taking with them 800 men and youths, 600 of whom were students at the military academy. They were taken with about 20 Panamanian guards to a secondary school in Balboa, on the Panama Canal, one of the prisoners said. An unidentified US source cited by AFP confirmed the existence of the prison camp and refugee center at the school. Some 2,000 Panamanian civilians were reported inside the school awaiting documentation. * US officers in Panama City told reporters that refugees from the fighting were being taken to Balboa Stadium, the city's largest sports complex. * On Thursday, sources at the Smithsonian said that 11 researchers and technicians working on San Blas Island had been released and were waiting for US troops to evacuate them. * Notimex cited unidentified Central American diplomats in Costa Rica who said that Endara's principal problem is that he has no "loyal" military and police forces. His power is based on the US military, foreign troops that will not rapidly withdraw as long as the US-installed government does not demonstrate that it can control the situation. One of the diplomats said, "Washington used 30,000 men, air support, tanks, and an enormous air fire power that dropped 4,000 bombs on Panama in only one day, and offered all this to world public opinion as an operation to arrest a drug trafficker." The diplomats pointed out that anti-imperialist sentiment is deeply rooted in Panamanian security forces due to the legacy of Gen. Omar Torrijos. Military personnel will hardly agree to serving the interests of a government imposed via direct US invasion. * Fighting intensified in Panama City late Thursday as two US warplanes bombed enemy positions. Flares lighted the night sky, and helicopters flew low over rooftops, shining bright searchlights. * Notimex reported that French journalist Chabjel Patrich was seriously wounded. Dec. 22: According to an AP report, US troops chased bands of Noriega supporters in several areas of the capital. Meanwhile, Noriega supporters were said to be in control of much of the countryside. US Embassy spokesperson Jan Edmonson told AP by telephone: "There are pockets of stiff resistance in the city. And also there's just the great element of fear. These people are going through parts of the city in just mobs, breaking windows, entering private homes, looting at will." In David, 230 miles west of Panama City and 30 miles from the border with Costa Rica, residents reached by telephone said Noriega supporters ruled the streets. Panamanian forces controlled the border with Costa Rica, permitting only people carrying passports from Latin American countries to enter Panama. In Chitre, 100 miles southwest of the capital, and site of a 200-soldier garrison, a PDF officer told AP: "We are with...(Noriega) until the last bullet. We are ready for the gringos. We are waiting for orders." Members of Dignity Battalions were observed at several points between David and Anton, located 60 miles southwest of Panama City and a few miles from Panama's Rio Hato military base. [Residents told reporters that Panamanians attacked US positions at Rio Hato late Wednesday and then apparently went into the mountains.] * President Bush told Congress he could not predict how long the military operation would continue, and said he had sent more troops in because the situation was deteriorating. Pentagon officials reported 22 Americans killed, including two civilian women, 202 wounded and two military men missing. According to the same sources, 122 Panamanians were killed and 45 wounded. * Endara admitted in an interview on ABC's "Good Morning America" that he cannot safely walk the streets but claimed he had the "wholehearted support" of the people. * Entranced by a \$1 million bounty offered by President Bush for Noriega's arrest, Panamanians reported sightings of the general throughout the capital. * At about 11:25 a.m., mortars were launched from railroad tracks below the Southern Command headquarters at Quarry Heights. Explosions shook several buildings. Snipers were reported in the hills above Quarry Heights. * There was no word on the whereabouts of most of the members of

Noriega's general staff. * Reporters estimated around 3,000 refugees at a high school soccer stadium in the city of Balboa, located on the Pacific entrance of the Panama Canal. Another 500 refugees were at the Revolution Soccer Stadium in Panama City, 200 at the Venezuela high school, 100 at another school, and 100 more at the Santa Ana Roman Catholic Church. Santo Tomas Hospital, one of the capital's biggest, on Balboa Avenue overlooking Panama Bay, was crowded with dead and wounded and running short of supplies. AP cited hospital deputy director Dr. Elmer Miranda as saying there were about 200 corpses in the basement. He added that he heard from a colleague that about 60 more bodies were being kept in Gorgas Hospital, run by the US Southern Command. Food and medicine shortages were reported in Balboa, Panama City and elsewhere. * For the third day, looting was rampant. Reporters said there were no police on the streets. Most stores remained closed. * First Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderon, temporarily the interior minister, named anti-Noriega Majors Ricardo Reyes Dutary and Juan Antonio Guisado to organize a traffic and police force. * In a telephone interview broadcast by the Vatican's radio station in Vatican City, Panamanian Archbishop Marcos McGrath said that the US invasion could mean the end of a tyranny, but must not be prolonged. He said the majority of Panamanians were not responsible for the repression in their country, and "must not be subjected to a foreign attack." According to the archbishop, "The invasion surprised us all. Maybe it was spawned by a series of reasons which everybody knows. But it has had a very strong impact on the people." McGrath said he was speaking on behalf of all Panamanian bishops. * Noriega supporters opened fire at Arias Calderon, but he was not injured. AFP cited witnesses who said the shots rang out as he was leaving the National Assembly building where he had given a press conference. Two bodyguards were wounded in the attack, they added. * Notimex reported that 80 Panamanians had died, and about 1,000 were wounded. * Communications between some embassies in Panama City and respective governments are not possible. Notimex mentioned that this is the case with the Nicaraguan and Mexican embassies. (Basic data from numerous reports by AP, AFP, Notimex, DPA, Xinhua, 12/20-22/89; Reuters, 12/20/89)

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