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Panamanians Take Refuge In Peruvian Ambassador's Home: Summary Of Events & Statements, Jan. 8-16

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 8: US troops surrounded the Peruvian ambassador's residence in Panama City where "key collaborators" of Gen. Manuel Noriega were believed to be in hiding. The Panamanian Foreign Ministry reported that former chief of the National Department of Investigations, Lt.Col. Luis Antonio Cordoba; Capt. Gonzalo Gonzalez, who headed the elite Machos de Monte company; Capt. Marcela Tason, described as Noriega's secretary, and her son who was a lieutenant in the now defunct Panama Defense Forces. Mercedes Morris, a spokesperson for the US Southern Command, told AP by telephone the surrounding of the ambassador's residence was taken "to prevent an individual who is trying to escape Panamanian and US justice from leaving." She did not identify that person. Jan. 9: Peruvian officials confirmed that 12 Panamanians had taken refuge in the Peruvian ambassador's residence, and that they had been granted asylum. In Lima, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Jose Torres said that Lt.Col. Cordova, who according to the Washington Post is wanted by US and Panamanian authorities, was not inside the residence. He confirmed the presence of Maj. Gonzalez. Torres said Peruvian officials have asked the new Panamanian government to allow the 12 people safe conduct out of the residence, and said they would be allowed to come to Peru if they wanted. He added, "We are doing this strictly for humanitarian reasons, for charity. This has nothing to do with the people themselves." Next, the spokesperson said Peruvian officials had sent a formal note to the US Embassy criticizing the invasion and complaining to US Ambassador in Peru, Anthony Quainton, that the presence of US troops around the ambassador's residence in Panama creates "an unnecessary climate of tension." In addition to Gonzalez, Torres said, the other Panamanians being sheltered in the residence are Capt. Marcela Tason, and her husband; Capt. Narcisa Castellero and her daughter; Maj. Heraclides Sucre, his wife, three children and mother; and Maj. Edgardo Lopez. There is currently no Peruvian ambassador in Panama City. The former ambassador, Mario Castro, was recalled last May after the presidential elections were annulled. Castro resigned Dec. 26 in what was reported as a break with Garcia over how the government should respond to the US invasion. Jan. 16: The Panamanian Foreign Ministry gave Luis Sandiga, charge d'affaires at the Peruvian Embassy in Panama City, 72 hours to leave the country. The expulsion was announced at a press conference by Deputy Foreign Minister Juan Custolovich. Custolovich said that Panama has recalled one of its accredited diplomats in Peru, due to arrive within 72 hours. The purpose of these actions, said the official, was in retaliation for the Peruvian government's offer of asylum to several officers who were Noriega supporters. (Basic data from AP, AFP, 01/08/90; Washington Post, 01/10/90; Xinhua, 01/16/90)

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