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Panama: Some Details Of U.S. Case Against Noriega Questionable

by Deborah Tyroler

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A few recent discoveries have hampered the US case against former Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega. The Washington Post reported this week that on Jan. 22 US military sources had admitted an error in identifying 50 kg. of material discovered by US occupation troops Dec. 22 in a house frequented by Noriega. At that time, the material was identified as cocaine wrapped in banana leaves. However, the white powder was found to be harmless corn meal used in tamales said the officials cited by the Post. On Jan. 23, an unidentified Pentagon spokesperson cited by DPA, the "frozen material" was meant for voodoo rituals, rather than a simple meal of tamales. According to the Washington Post, military and civilian officials have said 450 kg. of cocaine have been seized in Panama since the US invasion, but none could be linked directly to Noriega and used in the trial against him. Last weekend, the Miami Herald reported that earlier estimates of Noriega's vast fortune between \$200 and \$300 million were reportedly grossly exaggerated to enhance the prosecution's case. Despite a large quantity of documents US troops seized during the invasion, US government officials have been able to identify as Noriega's only about \$10 million in foreign bank accounts in France, Switzerland, Britain, Luxembourg and West Germany. Noriega reportedly owns property abroad, and many of his assets could be under assumed names. AFP cited unidentified judicial sources who said it would be difficult to prove what portion, if any, of his fortune came from money allegedly earned in drug or gun trafficking, or from protecting prostitution and gambling. Noriega's lawyers could, of course, argue that part of his wealth came from his long-time relationship with the CIA, which reportedly paid him about \$200,000 a year. (Basic data from Washington Post, AFP, DPA, 01/23/90)

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