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Deborah Tyroler

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Panama: Rebel Group Claims Responsibility For Nightclub Bombing, & U.S. Helicopter Crash

by Deborah Tyroler

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In a handout distributed March 16 in the western city of David, the December 20 Movement (M-20) claimed responsibility for the fatal crash of two US helicopters in December, and the March 2 bombing of a discotheque in Panama City. In the bombing, one US soldier was killed, 16 US troops were injured, and 12 Panamanians were injured. The US Southern Command said the Feb. 21 helicopter crash near Colon, at the northern end of the Panama Canal, killed 11 soldiers. The cause of the crash was attributed to bad weather. The pamphlet said that 30 US soldiers died, and that it was not an "accident." Government and Justice Minister Ricardo Arias Calderon said Panamanian officials did not have enough information to confirm M-20 was responsible for the bombing. He said the March 2 incident also appeared to involve a dispute among drug traffickers. Panama City newspapers reported March 17 that Rosendo Samudio Bonagas, a member of the small communist Party of the People, was arrested March 16 in David for handing out the fliers. The flier said, "We will attack everything we find in our path, especially property of the United States. We will avenge our dead...A soldier, dressed in civilian clothes or in uniform, will be executed...Our principal objective is everything that smells of gringos. We ask Panamanians not to go around with them because they will be in danger." On March 19, Notimex reported that the Panamanian police, Costa Rican Civil Guard, and the US Army had intensified security measures in response to death threats by M-20 against Presidents Guillermo Endara and Oscar Arias Sanchez. The stepped-up security measures went into effect upon discovery of 26 AK 47 sub-machineguns in Puerto Armuelles, located close to the Costa Rican border. The weapons presumably belonged to M-20. (Basic data from Pamphlets reportedly circulated by the group, according to La Republica, said the attacks would be launched on the weekend when the two convene in David, a Panamanian Pacific port, close to the common border. (Basic data from AP, 03/18/90; Notimex, 03/19/90)

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