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Former Panamanian Deputy Police Chief Escapes From Prison To Lead Rebellion: Summary Of Events & Statements

by Deborah Tyroler

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Dec. 4: Attorney General Rogelio Cruz told reporters that Col. Eduardo Herrera had escaped from a maximum security prison in an armored helicopter. In August, Herrera was fired as deputy national police chief. On Oct. 24, the colonel was incarcerated on Nao island, after being charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Since Oct. 24, he had been incarcerated on Nao island. Cruz said there were no casualties during the prison break. In a statement released to the press, Herrera vowed to fight for a "true democracy" in Panama. Business activities were closed in Panama City. President Guillermo Endara called an emergency cabinet meeting, and ordered schools closed for the day. Endara told reporters that Herrera attempted to promote a military rebellion. According to the president, with the assistance of 20 members of the Public Police Force, Herrera had stolen weapons from a police barracks. The majority of police agents throughout the country, said Endara, remained loyal to the government, and refused to join Herrera. Dec. 5: Unidentified official sources were cited by the Agence France Presse as saying that Herrera and about 100 followers had holed up in police headquarters in western Panama City, and had taken hostages. According to a DPA report, Herrera's followers numbered only 15. US army troops surrounded the headquarters at the government's request. According to officials, US Col. James Steele was acting as a mediator between the rebels and Endara. Interior deputy minister Ramon Lima was reported to have been taken hostage, but later in day left the police headquarters. Herrera told reporters that his objective was not "military rebellion." He said members of the police force "felt humiliated and wanted me to be their spokesman. I came to cooperate in the reconciliation of this country. No one has been kidnapped. No shot has been fired." Herrera said he told deputy minister Lima that his aim was to see the government demonstrate greater respect for the Public Police Force. Lima received a set of demands calling for wage hikes, improved working conditions, financial assistance to family members of police and soldiers killed during the US invasion, and creation of a special supervisory group to oversee adherence to the 1977 Panama Canal treaty. Next, Herrera called for a withdrawal of US troops, asserting that the issue at hand was among Panamanians. He said that Dec. 20, the anniversary of the US invasion, should be declared "a day of reconciliation, reflection and of forgiveness." In a communique, Herrera announced that members of the police force would support a nation-wide 24-hour strike organized by a coalition of public and private sector unions. He said that the police "have confirmed that the government's response to the demands of the people is neither just nor positive." Later Wednesday, Herrera and 200 supporters left police headquarters in the Curundu suburb with the objective of marching about a kilometer to the National Assembly building. Herrera and company were intercepted by about 200 US troops. No shots were fired in the initial encounter between the mutineers and US troops. The police then scattered in an attempt to hide in surrounding buildings. In the subsequent exchange of gunfire, one police officer was killed, and six persons were wounded. At least one policeman was wounded by gunfire when Herrera was captured, according to witnesses. The US soldiers also disarmed and detained about 50 of Herrera's followers, including a police captain who had apparently assisted the renegade police chief in his

escape from prison. Herrera was turned over to the Judicial Police. Leslye Loaiza, director of the Judicial Police, said Herrera had "negotiated" his surrender with a US military officer and was under "provisional arrest." AFP reported that according to witnesses, a US soldier fired on the officer who was killed. Attorney General Cruz said there was no evidence linking the policeman's death to a US soldier. Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD/Torrijista) leader Balbina de Perinan denounced the action by US troops, which he said "confirms that the Southern Command calls the shots in Panama." Dec. 6: Judicial Police chief Loaiza announced that 50 police officers loyal to Herrera had gone into hiding. Among those in hiding are former captains Jorge Bernal and Jorge Ballejos. National police chief Ebrahim Asvat said that 27 officers were under investigation. Attorney General Cruz said that Herrera was being charged with threatening state security, and could face 20 years in prison. President of the National Assembly, Alonso Fernandez, said he spoke with Herrera on Wednesday evening. He said that Herrera and followers were marching to the assembly to turn themselves in, not to seize the building. Foreign Minister Julio Linares said the move to call in US troops was the lesser of two evils. "On the one hand, we have an intervention by the United States, which no Panamanian likes...But, a worse evil would be if the rule of law and democracy were shipwrecked." Vice President Arias accused Herrera of insurrection, and asserted that the former colonel wanted to reinstate an army in Panama. AFP reported that at least 50 police, including Herrera, were detained at El Renacer prison. US troops were guarding the prison. Spanish daily newspaper *Diaria 16* published an interview with Xenia Ferreira, Herrera's spouse, conducted prior to the police rebellion. Ferreira, currently residing in Peru, said her husband was originally accused of attempting to destabilize the country for alleged involvement in an Oct. 16 trade union demonstration. However, she added, Herrera was outside the country at the time of the demonstration. Ferreira said, "Even though we had been warned that they could arrest him if we returned, we decided to go back. They arrested him in the airport on Oct. 25, and accused him of involvement in a coup d'etat." She asserted that Herrera returned to Panama to demonstrate his innocence. In the interview, Ferreira accused Vice President Arias Calderon of attempting to persuade Herrera to leave Panama. "He (Arias) did not want my husband to live in Panama because of his popularity, and even offered him money if he would leave." Ferreira asserted that Herrera was against the US invasion of Panama. "He said that the invasion should have been avoided at all costs, because it was a foreign army. He said there were other ways, such as attacking or arresting Noriega." Dec. 7: The Panamanian Journalists Union protested "the outrageous actions" of US soldiers who beat two photographers with rifle butts on Wednesday in Curundu. The Union also denounced President Endara's "puppet government" for its "immoral and anti-Panamanian" action of soliciting US troop intervention. The *Agence France Presse* quoted a senior Panamanian official who requested anonymity as saying that the US Army decided to intervene "unilaterally" before requested to do so by President Endara. The decision occurred after Herrera had captured two US colonels, including James Steel, commander of the Southern Command's military support group. When Herrera and over 50 elite units occupied the police headquarters, Stell, Interior deputy minister Ramon Lima, and other Panamanian and US officers were participating in an emergency meeting. Stell requested assistance by radio from Gen. William Harzog, Southern Command chief, after he and the others were subjected to tear gas and heavy weapons fire by police loyal to Herrera, said the source. Stell has supervised training, joint patrols and civic action activities by the US Army in Panama. The colonel headed the US military's advisory group in El Salvador from 1985 to 1987, and later coordinated weapons shipments to the Nicaraguan contras. Citing unidentified "intelligence sources," daily newspaper *La Estrella de Panama* reported that prior to US military

intervention, eight of the nine police garrisons in the country had offered support to Herrera. (Basic data from AFP, 12/04-07/90; DPA, 12/04/90; UPI, AP, 12/05/90; Notimex, 12/06/90)

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