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Panama: Government Publicizes Plot To Kill President Endara

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Feb. 6: At a press conference, President Guillermo Endara told reporters that police investigators had uncovered a plot to assassinate him and take over the government. Endara said the plot code-named "Kill the Fatman" was to be led by Eduardo Herrera, former National Police (Policia Tecnica Judicial-PTF) chief. Herrera was escorted to PTJ headquarters. In statements to reporters, Herrera denied any involvement in the conspiracy. He pointed out that his telephone and residence have been continually monitored by security agents, thereby precluding any possibility of organizing a coup. Herrera was placed under house arrest in 1991 for his role in a December 1990 police uprising. Feb. 7: Judicial authorities ordered Herrera transferred to a maximum security jail. At a press conference, Justice Minister Juan Chevalier and National Police chief Oswaldo Fernandez told reporters that eight PTJ and former members of the now defunct military had been detained. The two presented weapons and other materiel which were to have been used in the coup. Fernandez added that Claymore mines, grenades, detonators, ammunition, gloves, backpacks, and chemical ingredients used in explosives were found at the home of one of the alleged conspirators. According to results of a public opinion poll broadcast on local radio, 78% of respondents said they doubted such a plot existed. Pollsters found that most Panamanians attribute the government's accounts of assassination plots and related conspiracies to a desire to divert attention from failure to address social and economic problems. Feb. 8: Newspaper La Prensa reported that in sworn statements before the Attorney General, former associates of deposed general Manuel Noriega Donai Gallardo and Octavio Lorenzo Vega confessed to the Jan. 16 bombing of a private home and to planting another bomb which was deactivated by police. According to the report, Vega said Gallardo ordered him to make and plant the bombs in an effort to create "fear within the government," and set the stage for a coup. Vega added that Gallardo had told him to stockpile weapons and other materials in preparation for the coup. Feb. 12: In a sworn statement submitted to Attorney General Rogelio Cruz, Vega said police had forced him to sign a statement implicating retired colonel Herrera of masterminding a coup plot. He added that the day after having been forced to sign the document, police gave him US$100. Vega also denies having anything to do with the coup plot. (Basic data from Agence France-Presse, 02/06/92, 02/07/92, 02/12/92; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-Spanish news service EFE, 02/07/92, 02/12/92; Associated Press, 02/08/92)

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