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Deborah Tyroler

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Panama: On Rebel Groups & Coup Plots

by Deborah Tyroler

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Feb. 11: Former major Carlos Saldana released a communique announcing formation of a rebel group dedicated to "leading the fight for true democracy" in Panama. Saldana was a major in the Traffic Police and earned the nickname "Superman" for confronting US soldiers in the months prior to the December 1989 US invasion. Since the invasion, Saldana has been in hiding. The communique was accompanied by a photograph of rebel high command members Saldana dressed in military fatigues standing with a police officer and a civilian in front of the Panamanian flag and a portrait of general Omar Torrijos. After describing group members as Torrijistas, the statement said "injustices and excesses committed" by the government of President Guillermo Endara "will bring Panama to civil war." The group called for release of political prisoners and strict compliance with the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaty which mandates return of control over the Panama Canal to Panama and shutdown of US military bases by 2000. Next, the statement said the new rebel group rejects terrorism, and that violent incidents which took place in Panama City on Jan. 9 were carried out by paramilitary groups, Christian Democrats and "government factions." Panamanian police officers were described as "victims of humiliation and provocation" by the government. The statement said the new organization rejects the Endara government's neoliberal economic policies, and accused the administration of "total submission and relinquishment of national sovereignty."

Feb. 12: Attorney General Rogelio Cruz told reporters that Saldana is a members of the 20th of December Movement (M-20), even though the M-20 was not explicitly named in the statement. According to Cruz, Saldana organized several bank robberies and assaults on bus passengers to finance "seditious activities," including weapons purchases from El Salvador and Nicaragua. He added that arrest warrants were issued in October for Saldana and former lieutenant Alcibiades Rodriguez in connection with a bank robbery in Veraguas department. Next, Cruz said Saldana was behind a conspiracy code-name "take over the supermarket" to overthrow the government and kidnap President Endara and Vice Presidents Ricardo Arias and Guillermo Ford. He dismissed the possibility that the government would enter into negotiations with "terrorists." Cruz said "seditious cells" exist within the national police force. He added that three former members of the (defunct) Defense Forces, and three active duty police officers arrested on charges related to a recent coup plot were linked to one of many such cells.

Feb. 13: Endara prohibited all government officials from entering into any type of dialogue with persons incarcerated the previous week on charges of collaborating in a coup plot. He said the government would negotiate with former military officers and civilians associated with the Noriega regime who wished to work in "good faith" and within the "democratic system." Next, Endara asserted that the Saldana communique was "pure demagoguery by those who want to return to the corruption of the past." The president reiterated that his administration will not negotiate the continuity of US military bases in Panama beyond 2000. The government offered a US$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of Saldana or Rodriguez. Members of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) participated in a peaceful demonstration in front of the US Embassy to commemorate the birthday of Gen. Omar Torrijos, killed in an airplane crash in 1981. In a communique, the PRD blasted the government's socio-economic policies and military and political ties to the US. The statement said, "More than 26 months after the cruel US invasion of Panama, the North American government, through the
Southern Command and its multiple agencies, and with the complicity of the [Endara] regime, is developing political, military and economic strategies of dependence and domination. According to the PRD, "discoveries" by the government of assassination plots, coups d'etat and weapons arsenals were nothing more than attempts to "neutralize and eliminate legitimate mechanisms of popular expression." Christian Democrat Deputy Guillermo Cochez said that the numerous coup plots reported by the government were like tales "straight out of Alice in Wonderland." He noted, however, that the wave of terrorism "is not a game," and asserted that the administration "lacks the maturity necessary to manage issues related to public security in a serious manner." Feb. 14: Menalco Solis, head of the Public Security and Defense Council, told reporters that all security forces had been placed on maximum alert in view of threats from clandestine "leftist groups." He asserted, however, that the conspirators posed no real threat of overthrowing the government. (Basic data from Agence France-Presse, 02/11-14/92; Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias-Spanish news service EFE, 02/12/92, 02/13/92; Notimex, 02/13/92)

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