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Panamanian Police Invade University in Pursuit of Students Protestors

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Anti-riot police set off a national furor Dec. 9 by invading the University of Panama to round up students protesting privatization of the water and sewer system Instituto de Acueductos y Alcantarillados Nacionales (IDAAN). The crackdown led to more protests and rumors that the government planned further strong-arm tactics aimed at canceling the May 1999 presidential election. The protests began Dec. 3 when an estimated 10,000 students and workers, led by the Movimiento por la Defensa de la Soberania (MONADESO), marched on the Legislative Assembly to protest the IDAAN privatization bill.

Protestors also demanded revocation of a government decree moving the observance of holidays to create three-day "puentes" encouraging domestic tourism. Assembly security guards and police battled the protestors with rubber bullets, tear gas, and buckshot for several hours. Another demonstration was held the following day. Privatization does not have broad support. The sale of IDAAN does not have much popular support and is opposed by some political parties.

Ruben Arosemena, president of the Partido Democristano Cristiano (PDC), said he fears privatization will lead to water-rate hikes and reduced government subsidies to the poor for potable water. He wants the government to invest funds from other privatizations to improve IDAAN service rather than turn it over to foreign interests. "Sixteen percent of the population...does not have potable water and, in areas where they do, service is sporadic and deficient," Arosemena said.

During the weekend lull after the Dec. 3 and 4 protests, government officials appeared to back down, announcing that the IDAAN privatization bill would be modified to ensure that the subsidies would remain and service would be maintained in poor neighborhoods. But the protests resumed on Dec. 8. On Dec. 9, in the most dramatic confrontation, anti-riot police invaded a secondary school to rout protestors who had blocked streets. Police then entered the University of Panama. Press reports said at least 110 students were arrested at the two schools and 20 were hurt. Three police officers were also injured.

University rector Gustavo Garcia said police proceeded with the occupation of the university even though he had already persuaded the students to end the street blockades. However, Minister of Government and Justice Mariela Sagel said the police acted because the rector had "lost control" of the situation. Under Panamanian law, police may not enter the university except to rescue victims in case of disasters. But President Ernesto Perez Balladares said the action was justified because students were "delinquents" who threw stones and Molotov cocktails at police and used the university grounds as a refuge.

Similar protests in Santiago in Veraguas province and in the Caribbean city of Colon were also put down by vigorous police measures. Noting that the Dec. 9 action took place a day before the
50th anniversary of the UN Declaration on Human Rights, human rights ombud Italo Antinori condemned the government decision to use force. In a Dec. 15 press conference, he said the police action was a violation of human rights. He said rubber bullets, shotguns, and tear-gas grenades are weapons of war that carry explicit written warnings that their use could cause severe injuries or death.

The police disregard for university autonomy enraged university officials who said they would sue the government officials responsible. Students, labor unions, and university groups immediately demanded the president's removal from office. The Confederacion Nacional de Unidad Sindical (CONUSI) called for the removal of other officials thought to have taken part in ordering the police crackdown. They include Minister Sagel, Education Minister Pablo Thalassinos, National Police chief Jose Luis Sosa, and Eduardo Herrera, governor of Panama province. Herrera admitted he ordered the police to enter the university, but Perez Balladares was widely assumed to have been behind the crackdown.

An editorial in El Panama America said, "The anti-riot police did what [former dictator] Manuel Noriega in his worst moment never dared to do." An editorial in La Prensa dismissed Herrera's claim that he ordered the police to act, saying, "No rational person believes there is a governor capable of taking on a decision with such vast repercussions." The editorial laid the blame squarely on Perez Balladares. The Central General Autonoma de Trabajadores de Panama (CGTP) issued a statement saying the attack was the president's attempt at revenge against the people of Panama for voting against a re-election referendum in August (see Noticen, 09/03/98).

MONADESO was one of the prominent organizations that opposed the president's bid for re-election. University autonomy has not been violated since the military coup led by Gen. Omar Torrijos in 1968. The media, university, and opposition parties drew a parallel with 1968, speculating that Perez Balladares was beginning a campaign to cancel the upcoming elections and perpetuate himself in office. "There is something behind all this," said Partido Arnulfista presidential candidate Mireya Moscoso. "It is being said in the streets that there will be no elections next year." [Sources: El Panama America, 12/08/98, 12/09/98, 12/10/98; Inter Press Service, 12/11/98; Notimex, 12/09/98, 12/10/98, 12/12/98; La Prensa (Panama), 12/09/98, 12/10/98, 12/11/98, 12/15/98, 12/16/98]