

US Intervention in Panama

The US is once again flexing its muscles in Central America with a military beef-up of US troops in Panama. On May 11th President Bush announced that he was sending about 2,000 additional combat troops to Panama under the pretext of protecting American lives, after the US-backed opposition candidates Guillermo Endara, Guillermo Ricardo Ford and Arias Calderon failed to assume power after the May 7th national elections.

The elections were annulled by General Noriega on May 10th due to «the obstruction by foreigners and the lack of tally sheets» which resulted in the non-election of a president, two vice-presidents and the national assembly.

ELECTION INTERFERENCE

The US interfered in the sovereign elections in Panama using various means to ensure the election of the «right» slate. Firstly, President Bush instructed the CIA to fund the opposition candidates to the tune of \$10 million. Then, Bush sent a 13-member uninvited delegation of elected officials to Panama to «supervise.» After the elections the state department was referring to the opposition candidate, Guillermo Endara, as the president-elect of Panama.

WHY THE US WANTS NORIEGA OUT

There are two inter-related reasons why the US wants Noriega out and therefore beefed up its troops to approximately 12,000 in Panama. The first reason is because Noriega and the 15,000-strong national defense force he heads, challenge US imperialist interests concerning the Panama canal. Noriega has called for the over 10,000 US troops stationed in the canal zone to go and the implementation of the September 1977 Treaty Concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal. These two treaties, which were signed by President Carter and General Omar Torrijos of Panama

and took effect in October 1979, maintain that Panama alone shall operate the canal and maintain military forces in Panama after 1999.

Additionally, until the year 2,000, the US will operate the canal through an independent federal agency appointed by the US president consisting of five Americans and four Panamanians. Presently, the administrator is an American and his deputy is a Panamanian but in January 1990 this will be reversed. This treaty also states that the only permissible purpose of US intervention is to keep the canal «open, secure and accessible» and that such intervention «shall never be directed against the territorial integrity or political independence of Panama.»

Reaganites objected to Carter's agreement with Torrijos thinking that the canal belongs to the US. Recently, Republican leader Newt Gingrich reiterated Reagan's line that the US would never cede the canal to Panama. Therefore, for over 18 months the US has embarked upon a campaign—overtly and covertly—to oust Noriega and put in his place someone who will ultimately be willing to change the terms of the canal treaties, since Noriega has been the key figure favoring the return of the canal to under its country's control. This waterway is extremely important to US interests because not only does it facilitate commercial shipping but more importantly it enables the US Navy to move its ships freely between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The second reason why the US wants Noriega out is because it needs a client government in place there to continue to operate freely their Southern Command base which is in charge of most US military operations in Central and South America and is headquartered there. This Command is imperialism's main military outpost in Central America and is essential to continue US-backed counter insurgency activities in El Salvador and elsewhere in the area. Therefore, with Noriega in power, the US sees the future of this base threatened.

SANCTIONS AGAINST PANAMA

The US over the past year and a half has implemented various sanctions against this country of 2.2 million in an effort to destabilize the country and oust Noriega. Among these efforts include economic sanctions which have been in place since late 1987. These sanctions include a freeze on the Panama canal revenues and on Panamanian assets in the US. As a result, Panama has suffered an economic crisis which has reduced output by 25%. Meanwhile, the US is also threatening to seize the General's assets in the US and Europe or impose additional sanctions like prohibiting trade between the US and Panama thereby squeezing the noose on Panama's economy and deepening Panama's economic crisis.

The US has also recalled its ambassador to Panama, Arthur Davis who left on May 15th. At the same time, it ordered all US citizens to move on to the US military bases. Last year, US courts indicted Noriega on drug trafficking charges in a Florida court trying to discredit him morally on the international level.

Other maneuvers include Bush's offering the carrot to the Panamanian people by saying that if Noriega were to step down from office then the relations with the US would improve dramatically and instantly.

The US has even gone so far as to give the green light to the Panamanian Defense Forces to overthrow Noriega. Bush said, «I would love to see them (PDF) get him out. He's one man and they have a well-trained force.» (International Herald-Tribune, May 18)

MILITARY BUILD—UP

Since unilateral sanctions have not worked, the US resorted to the military option. The over 10,000 US troops in Panama were put on a very high state of alert following the elections. Addi-