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By ROBERT PEARS special to The New York Times

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 9 — The war of nerves between the United States and Panama intensified today as the Panamanian authorities arrested two American military policemen, apparently in retaliation for the arrest on Tuesday of 29 Panamanians by American forces in Panama.

In Washington, the Defense Department said the two soldiers were detained, for no stated reason, by Panamanian troops at Fort Amador, a military installation jointly operated by the United States and Panama. Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the Panamanian leader, has an office at the base.

After the arrest of the two Americans today, United States forces at Fort Amador arrested two Panamanian military policemen on duty at the installation's front gate. All four were released within three hours after today's confrontation began.

A Bush Administration official said the harassment of American forces in Panama, illustrated by the events Tuesday and today, were contributing to a further deterioration of relations between the two countries.

"We have an obligation to stand up" to General Noriega and the Panama Defense Forces, of which he is commander in chief, the official said. "We intend to enforce our rights under the Panama Canal treaties."

Security Measures

American forces tightened security and restricted access to Fort Amador today. Civilians were allowed to come and go, but Panamanian military personnel could not enter.

On Tuesday, United States marines in Panama detained 29 Panamanians who were said to have interfered with

Panamanians, some in military uniform and some in civilian clothes, were found to be carrying automatic rifles, grenades, pistols, a submachine gun and other weapons, the Defense Department said. The Panamanians were released after an hour and 15 minutes. Among those detained was Maj. Manuel Sieiro, a brother-in-law of General Noriega.

Col. Ronald T. Sconyers, a spokesman for the United States Southern Command, said the problems began on Tuesday when a vehicle in a Marine convoy was halted by Panamanian forces. The convoy was conducting a reconnaissance operation to check the condition of roads and confirm that it could move along certain routes.

The convoy turned into Empire Range, a United States Army installation in Panama, and it was followed by Panamanian military vehicles which, Colonel Sconyers said, had no right to be there. At that point, he said, the Americans detained 9 Panamanian soldiers and 20 civilians.

Bush Sends More Troops

The context for this week's events was described in May by Richard C. Brown, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs. He said at a Congressional hearing that General Noriega had "organized a campaign of harassment" against American military personnel in Panama. "Noriega's goon squads," he said, had arrested Americans and confiscated their property with no explanation. Mr. Brown said the United States was prepared to use military force.

President Bush strengthened United States forces in Panama on May 11,

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American troops restricted access
to Fort Amador.

sending almost 2,000 additional troops there "to protect American lives." This raised the total number of United States military personnel in Panama to 13,600.

Fort Amador is on the Pacific side of the country, close to Panama City and the canal. The installation includes barracks for Panamanian troops, General Noriega's office, several offices of the United States Southern Command and an American naval station.

The United States has been unsuccessful for more than 18 months in its efforts to persuade General Noriega to give up power. In February 1988, he was indicted by two Federal grand juries on drug-trafficking charges.

General Noriega nullified the presidential election held in Panama on May 7 after bloody confrontations between Government troops and supporters of opposition candidates who say they won the election by a wide margin.