

U.S. Is Faulted on Military Maneuvers in Panama

By ROBERT PEARS special to The New York Times

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Demonstrators at a rally yesterday in support of democracy in Panama meeting with an opposition leader, Guillermo Quijano, center, outside the Washington headquarters of the Organization of

American States. Inside, a negotiating team said that United States military maneuvers were partly responsible for the failure of their efforts to persuade Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to give up power.

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 — Delegates of an Organization of American States negotiating team asserted today that military maneuvers by the United States armed forces in Panama were partly responsible for the failure of their effort to persuade Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega to give up power.

The O.A.S. mission to Panama also expressed deep concern about recent "violations of human, civil and political rights" said by opposition leaders to have been committed by the Government of General Noriega, Panama's military leader.

Foreign ministers from throughout the hemisphere met here tonight for a special session to discuss the situation in Panama. Bush Administration officials, embarrassed by the criticism of United States military maneuvers, said that their experiment with multilateral diplomacy had been a failure and that they had not decided what to do next.

Since it was appointed in May, the organization's negotiating mission, led by Foreign Minister Diego Córdovez of Ecuador, has made five visits to Panama in an effort to bring about the transfer of power from the Noriega regime to a democratically elected government. The mediators acknowledged today that they had failed to achieve that goal, but said that further talks between the Panamanian Government and opposition parties might be useful.

War of Nerves With Panama

The report from the panel confirmed widespread predictions that the 31-member organization could not dislodge General Noriega. The organization has had a spotty record in dealing with disputes in the hemisphere. One of its successes was to arrange an armistice in the "soccer war" between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969.

The United States describes the Noriega-backed Government of Panama under as a "puppet regime," does not recognize its legitimacy and has tried to oust General Noriega through a combination of economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure and covert operations.

General Noriega was indicted by two Federal grand juries in Florida on drug-trafficking charges in February 1988. The United States has long sought to oust him, especially after he annulled elections in May.

As part of a war of nerves with Panama, the United States has held a series of increasingly conspicuous military exercises there. In the last month, armored personnel carriers have rumbled through streets near Panama City; the Army, Navy and Air Force have evacuated relatives of some military personnel, and United States Marines slid down ropes from helicopters, then took up positions around the American Embassy.

'Negative Effect' of Maneuvers

American officials said the purpose of the exercises was to reassert United States rights under the Panama Canal treaties and to discourage harassment of American servicemen.

But in a report tonight, the panel said that such maneuvers had a "negative effect" on the effort to negotiate a transfer of power by Sept. 1, when the constitutional mandate for Panama's Acting President expires.

"Without making a pronouncement on the legality or illegality" of the military operations, the panel said they were "inopportune."

"It is essential to avoid the possibility of an incident that, in the present circumstances in Panama, might thwart all efforts to achieve a peaceful solution," the report said. "The mission is of the opinion that at this time it is essential to avoid actions that could exacerbate the situation."

The panel also called on the United States and Panama to "normalize their bilateral relations," saying such a move "would give impetus to the search for a negotiated solution" in Panama.

There have been reports that Panama was giving refuge to members of Colombian drug cartels since Bogotá began rounding up drug sus-

pects in the last week.

Richard A. Boucher, the deputy State Department spokesman, said today that General Noriega had "turned Panama into a major center for money laundering and transshipment of cocaine" and had provided weapons to "drug bosses and their terrorist allies" in Colombia.

Ricardo Arias Calderón, a leader of the Panamanian opposition, said today that "despite the great efforts of the O.A.S. mission, the negotiation was not successful because of Noriega's unwillingness to step down."

"At no point," he said, "would the representatives of the regime consider any formula under which General

The Noriega talks suffered, the Latin American diplomats say.

Noriega would retire from his position as Commander in Chief" of the Panama Defense Forces. "He has been, he is and he will remain the key unresolved issue, the great obstacle to solving the Panamanian crisis and the great obstacle to Panama's being able to democratize its political life," Mr. Arias Calderón said at a news conference here.

The panel said it had urged the Panamanian Government to end such violations of civil liberties as the detention of political prisoners and restrictions on the press.

General Noriega, in Panama, referred to the opposition negotiators Tuesday as "idiots" and said they had made a "historic error" by turning down his offer to share power in a new government starting Sept. 1.

Opposition leaders say there is no need for power-sharing arrangements or new elections because they won the elections on May 7. General Noriega annulled those elections after bloody confrontations between Noriega supporters and protesters who asserted that the Government was stealing the elections.