

# PRESIDENT CALLS PANAMA SLAYING A GREAT OUTRAGE

## NEW SHOOTING INCIDENT

### American Lieutenant Wounds a Uniformed Panamanian in Clash at a Laundry

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 18 — President Bush today called the weekend slaying of an American Marine officer by Panamanian soldiers "an enormous outrage." With tensions high, a United States military officer in Panama City wounded a uniformed Panamanian a few hours after the President spoke.

Frustrated by the success of Panama's military leader, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, in thwarting American vows to depose him, Mr. Bush and his senior aides said they were leaving open the possibility of military action in Panama after Panamanian soldiers shot and killed a Marine officer at a roadblock on Saturday night. The officer's identity and rank have not been made public.

#### Troops, or Strong Language?

But it is not clear whether the Administration is seriously considering specific plans or whether officials, still smarting from criticism of their handling of the failed coup attempt in Panama in October, are simply employing more muscular language to keep the heat on General Noriega while they decide how to proceed.

Mr. Bush, who was interviewed today by four reporters from news services, avoided giving a direct answer when asked how he would respond to the new violence in Panama. "All Presidents have options," he said, "but they don't discuss what they might be."

The United States Southern Command in Panama City, which has about 12,000 soldiers, has a set of contingency plans to deal with Panamanian provocations or attacks against United States military or diplomatic personnel. The troops are in the region as a rapid deployment force and to defend the Panama Canal, but in the months since General Noriega annulled free elections, they have often been on heightened alert because of tensions between the two countries.

#### Details Sketchy on New Shooting

Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman, said today that the shootings were part of a "a pattern of indiscriminate violence" touched off by General Noriega on Friday when he declared that a state of war existed between Panama and the United States.

Details of the shooting in Panama today were sketchy. But American military officials here and in Panama City said a United States Army lieutenant was leaving a laundry near the headquarters of the United States Southern Command when he was approached by

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# Bush Expresses 'Outrage' at Panama Slaying

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a uniformed Panamanian. There were conflicting reports about whether the Panamanian was a police officer or a member of General Noriega's army.

At first, Pentagon officials told reporters that the Panamanian drew his own gun and the American then fired twice. But the Pentagon later gave a different version. In a written statement, the Pentagon said the American was leaving the laundry when he was approached by the Panamanian, who "signaled the serviceman to stop and then approached him."

"The U.S. serviceman felt threatened when he saw the Panamanian apparently reach for his weapon," the statement said. "The American responded defensively by pulling a weapon and fired two shots. The Panamanian went down, then got up and left the scene. The extent of his injuries is unknown at this time and the event is currently under investigation."

The Associated Press, reporting from Panama, quoted a Southern Command official, who refused to be more specifically identified, as saying that the Panamanian was an army corporal.

The shooting was the second violent episode in 48 hours involving American and Panamanian forces. On Saturday night, Administration officials said, Panamanian soldiers shot and killed one of four American officers who had taken a wrong turn in their car and wound up at a roadblock near the headquarters of General Noriega's forces.

In an interview today with the New York radio station WBAI, General Noriega said the Americans started the shooting by firing first and wounding several people, including a girl, a night watchman and an elderly man.

## 'A Grave Escalation'

Panama's Foreign Minister, Leonardo Kam, said at a news conference in Panama City that two civilians and a soldier were wounded by the Amer-

icans in that confrontation. He called the episode "a grave escalation in the permanently hostile policy of provocation and intimidation that the U.S. Army has been systematically pursuing against the Panamanian people."

But Administration officials said the American officers were unarmed. They said they were in civilian clothes and lost in the Chorrillo neighborhood, near the military headquarters. At a roadblock, Panamanian soldiers tried to pull the Americans out of their car and then opened fire when they fled, killing one and wounding another in the ankle, Administration officials said.

The American military in Panama was on a Delta One alert today, re-

## With tensions high, a new shooting occurs.

stricted to bases that were patrolled by guards in combat gear. Panamanian Government troops with machine guns blocked the street in front of the Panamanian military command.

### Handled Personally by Bush

In Washington tonight, the Panamanian situation was reportedly being handled personally by Mr. Bush and his top-level advisers, including Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser, Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Gen. Colin L. Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

If the top echelon was considering specific military action, orders had apparently not been passed down to lower-level planners and strategists in the Pentagon. The Joint Chiefs did not convene a formal session on Panama today. Senior officers said there was

considerable sentiment for not allowing the shooting to pass unanswered, but there was no clear sense of what form such a response would involve.

Mr. Fitzwater also cited American reports that Panamanian soldiers had beaten and interrogated an American naval officer on Saturday night and sexually threatened his wife. Other members of the American military were detained and had their weapons and radios taken away at a Panama airport during the weekend, he said.

Last week, American officials said a Panamanian soldier pointed a gun at a United States officer near a garbage dump, but no shots were fired.

"When you put all of these together, you begin to discern a certain climate of aggression that is very disturbing," Mr. Fitzwater said.

### 'It's Pretty Open-Ended'

Asked about the possibility of military action in Panama, a Pentagon official said: "There is always the potential that things can get elevated, but at this point we're going to see what develops. It's pretty open-ended and we haven't closed the door on the military option, but it's conditional on what happens next."

The official said the shooting today was not thought to have been linked to the killing of the American officer and the other incidents over the weekend.

Another Administration official said that the Panamanian military "tried to reassure us that the Saturday night shooting was an accident, an isolated incident that was unintended."

The official would not say whether the United States had accepted that explanation. "We don't think there's an excuse for what happened," he said.

Earlier today, reports that elements of the Army's 18th Airborne Corps were on alert prompted speculation that the United States might be planning a military response in Panama. The 18th Airborne is the Army's fast-reaction force and includes paratroopers of the 82d Airborne Division.

But the Pentagon issued a statement this afternoon saying the units were involved in previously scheduled exercises to test their readiness. The exercises "are not related to the incident in Panama," the statement added.

The Pentagon did not identify the units of the 18th Airborne Corps involved in the exercise, but some officials said that it involved the 82d Airborne.