

# PANAMA SHOOTING CONDEMNED BY U.S.

## Military Response to Death of Soldier Not Barred by Bush Administration

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 17 — The Bush Administration said today that the shooting of an unarmed American army officer by Panamanian soldiers Saturday night was part of a pattern of "aggression" by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and that Washington would not rule out a military response.

"We are extremely concerned that a climate of aggression has been developing that puts American lives at risk," said the State Department spokeswoman, Margaret D. Tutwiler. "The situation in Panama is being intensely watched."

Asked if she could rule out a military response to what is being described as the most serious confrontation between American and Panamanian soldiers in 25 years, Miss Tutwiler said, "We don't discuss contingency plans or options. We never rule anything in or out."

### 'Off Duty, Unarmed'

A statement from the United States Southern Command in Panama said the slain officer was "off duty, unarmed and in civilian clothes when he and three others were stopped by Panamanian soldiers near the Defense Headquarters in the old section of Panama City."

The Panamanians tried to drag the Americans from their car and fired at them as they drove off, killing an officer, it said. His identity was withheld pending notification of relatives. The Pentagon said a second soldier was grazed on the ankle by a bullet.

The Panamanian military accused United States officers of a provocation, without mentioning the American's death. The Panamanian statement said the officers had "broken through checkpoints and fired at the headquarters building, wounding a soldier and two civilians, including a 1-year-old girl."

The Pentagon also said that an American lieutenant and his wife were stopped at the same roadblock and witnessed the shooting. The Panamanians then blindfolded both with masking tape and interrogated them for about four hours, it said.

### Couple Reported Beaten

They repeatedly beat the man and threatened to kill him if he did not give information on his duties and unit, the Pentagon said.

His wife's head was cut when she was slammed against a wall and she later collapsed, it said. Panamanian soldiers also threatened her sexually before the pair was escorted back to a road that connects with United States bases and released, the Pentagon said.

The United States has 12,000 troops stationed in Panama protecting the Panama Canal as part of the Southern Command. The command is known to have a variety of contingency plans to deal with provocations against Americans by the Noriega Government.

President Bush was first briefed on the incident late Saturday night by the national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, and has been receiving regular updates since then, a White House spokesman, Roman Popadiuk, said.

Mr. Bush refused to answer questions on the killing shouted at him by reporters after a church service at a military base in Arlington, Va. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Colin L. Powell, both went to the Pentagon today to get briefed on the shooting, but then left.

### No Security Council Meeting

There was no formal meeting of the National Security Council, which brings together the most senior decision makers in the Administration, but officials said that the Secretaries of Defense and State, the national security adviser and the President were in contact by telephone throughout the day.

Responding to the incident, Secretary of Defense Cheney said: "We've seen General Noriega brutalize the people of Panama, crack down on his own civilians and military alike after the latest coup attempt, designate himself the leader of the country, and declare a state of war with the United States. These actions have created an atmosphere in which Panamanian Defense Forces feel free to fire on unarmed Americans. We fully expect that those responsible will be brought to justice."

Saturday's shooting took place against a steadily rising spiral of tension between General Noriega's Government and the United States going back to the beginning of 1988, when General Noriega was indicted on Federal drug charges in the United States and the Bush Administration began openly urging his overthrow.

On Oct. 3, rebellious Panamanian officers and enlisted men failed in an attempt to oust General Noriega. The Bush Administration aided the rebels by acceding to their request to block several roads. Earlier, the Administration had imposed economic sanctions, which were added to recently.

On Friday, Panama's National Assembly, which is controlled by Noriega loyalists, unanimously declared the country in a "state of war" with the United States and named General Noriega chief of government. Previously he had been Panama's de facto ruler as chief of the Defense Forces.

Earlier in the week, the Southern Command said it had received documents from the Panamanian military in which a local municipal official sought the arrest of Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, head of the Southern Command and one of his deputies, Gen. Mark Cisneros. The officers were accused of harassment because of American military exercises.