

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

POWs score prelate's 'complicit silence'

Three years after the invasion, the U.S.-installed government refuses to release prisoners of war.

On the eve of the third anniversary of the U.S. yuletide invasion of Panama, the scores of Panamanian civilians and military personnel who were taken prisoner by the invading forces and who remain jailed, sent an open letter to Archbishop Marcos McGrath demanding that the Panamanian Catholic Church's hierarchy act in accord with the tenets of Christian charity.

McGrath, along with former Panamanian President Nicolás Ardito Barletta, was one of the co-authors of the 1986 Inter-American Dialogue proposal to selectively legalize drugs. More recently, he and Barletta (whose presidential campaign was financed by the Colombian cocaine cartels) signed on to the Inter-American Dialogue's blueprint for the elimination of national sovereignty, *Convergence and Community: The Americas in 1993* (see article, page 46).

In their letter, published on Dec. 13 by *La Estrella de Panamá*, the detainees accuse the regime of drug bankers named as the government of Panama by George Bush, of absolute disregard for human rights and the rule of law. The Panamanian POWs are particularly upset by the Church hierarchy's opposition to a bill being considered by the legislature to amnesty the victims of political persecution.

McGrath's auxiliary bishop, the Spaniard José Luis Lacunza, attacked the proposed amnesty has "inopportune." It makes no distinction between "political and common crimes," he said, and "it goes too far in allowing the worst delinquents this country has

known to evade justice"—a reference to those who served in the Panamanian government along with Gen. Manuel Noriega, a POW of the United States government.

The writers remind McGrath that they were all taken prisoner at the time of the invasion. "Besides the thousands left dead and wounded, during our captivity our human rights were systematically violated, as were those of thousands of other Panamanians by the U.S. Armed Forces on behalf of the government sworn in at a [U.S.] military base. The Catholic Church kept a complicit silence then." It also remained silent "when the hostilities ceased, and in open violation of the III Geneva Convention of Aug. 12, 1949 regarding Prisoners of War, we were handed over to the Panamanian authorities although there were no charges pending against us."

Those charges were concocted later, when the U.S.-installed regime used the media to solicit people to accuse the prisoners of crimes, say the prisoners in their letter. "The hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Panama kept silent in the face of all of that," and remained silent "when our families were persecuted by the national authorities."

The detainees note "that justice cannot be dispensed by a system that has proven not to have the moral authority to dispense it." The Church acts as if it were unaware of the virtual circuses that are organized when prisoners are called to testify; "of the lack of judicial independence; of the judges that have been fired from their

posts for following the law; of the corruption of prosecutors." Many of the prisoners have become gravely ill during their incarceration, "but they have been inhumanely prevented from receiving hospital attention."

Pope John Paul II, they write, insists that mercy is the beginning of justice. "Mercy and forgiveness are not opposed to justice, they demand it," says the pope, according to the letter. The authors also remind the Panamanian primate that "the hierarchy of the Panamanian Catholic Church cannot be perceived as taking sides, as sectarian, as siding with the oligarchy, but as a source of inspiration of the causes of all Panamanians."

Finally: "We are convinced that the truth will make us free and that someday it will be recognized how much injustice against us is being done in this country, in the name of a poorly understood Democracy."

Lending confirmation to their charges of prosecutorial corruption, on Christmas Eve, Attorney General Rogelio Cruz was fired and placed under arrest on drug-related charges.

The International Federation of Journalists has announced that it has asked the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva to investigate the political persecution against several Panamanian journalists.

Among those being persecuted is newscaster Julio Ortega, who is accused of the "common crime" of "unlawful possession" of government property. Although there are no witnesses against Ortega, and despite the fact that the prosecutors admit that most of the items in question were taken by the invading U.S. troops, and that he never "personally received" the items, still the U.S.-installed government insists that Ortega is criminally "responsible" and must be imprisoned.