

BEATING IN PANAMA PROTESTED BY U.S.

Police Attack and Threatened Killing of American Sailor Are Called Despicable

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 12 — The United States has strongly protested the severe beating and threatened killing of an American sailor by Panama's Defense Forces, Pentagon officials said today. The Panamanian Government has acknowledged that the incident occurred, but made no apology.

"The U.S. forces find this incident to be despicable," said a Defense Department letter sent to the Panamanian authorities last month. It complained of "criminal conduct and lack of discipline" of highway policemen in Panama's Defense Forces, which it said represented "an ominous reflection of either a campaign of intimidation directed against the U.S. forces community or a loss of control over elements of the Public Security Forces."

The incident involved Mike Nieves, a petty officer with the United States Southern Command in Panama, who was detained by three highway policemen on Nov. 13, struck in the face, pulled through the window of his car by his neck and struck again, the letter said. He "was then physically and psychologically degraded," it continued.

One officer "drew his pistol, placed it next to the sailor's head, and forced him to his knees," the letter said. "He was forced to beg for his life."

Shot Missed His Head

A Panamanian officer who was about to kill the sailor was stopped at the last moment by one of his associates, the letter said, but still fired a shot that missed his head.

Petty Officer Nieves had been detained for allegedly parking an official military vehicle in a no-parking zone at the Panama City airport.

The letter was accompanied by photos of the sailor, who suffered extensive bruises and was hospitalized.

The letter was written by Lieut. Col. Robert S. Perry, the co-chairman of a joint American-Panamanian committee created to deal with such grievances, to his Panamanian counterpart, Lieut. Col. Aquilino Sieriro Murgas, who is a brother-in-law of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, the Panamanian strongman. The protest was made after a thorough investigation of the incident, Pentagon officials said.

"This pattern of intentional harassment by the Panama Defense Forces is unacceptable," Senator Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, said today. "The Administration should protest it in the strongest possible terms and take whatever steps are necessary to protect American civilians and U.S. troops in Panama."

Petty Officer Nieves is from Massachusetts.