

General Sees Lack of Panama Policy

By ELAINE SCIOLINO

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 23 — The commander of American forces in Latin America has charged that the Bush Administration is not prepared to deal with Panama's political crisis because of a policy vacuum in Washington.

Adding his voice to critics who say the Administration has moved slowly in formulating its foreign policy, Gen. Fred Woerner, commander in chief of the Panama-based Southern Command, said in a speech last Friday that American policymakers should be "seriously debating" what action to take in Panama when presidential elections are held on May 7.

"We are frankly ill prepared to do that now because, as you well know, we have a vacuum in Washington in the absence of an appointment of an assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs," General Woerner said in Panama City at a regional meeting of American Chambers of Commerce. "Until we get that position filled and the debate can commence, I offer you little hope of an articulated policy."

The general's speech was closed to the press, but excerpts from his remarks were made available by the Southern Command.

Administration officials say Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d has recommended Bernard W. Aronson, a Democrat who advocated military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels in the Reagan



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Administration, to be Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs. But President Bush has not yet nominated him, and the position is subject to Senate confirmation.

Some Lawmakers Object

Several lawmakers from both parties who have met with Mr. Aronson say he may not be the right person for the job, because he lacks first-hand knowledge and experience in most of the region and also the skills to administer an unwieldy bureau that covers 33 countries.

Mr. Baker has been reluctant to discuss how the Administration intends to deal with Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the Panamanian leader, who remains in power despite an initiative by the Reagan Administration to oust him after he was indicted on drug trafficking charges by two Federal grand juries a year ago.

In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday, Mr. Baker said only that the United States would not move to normalize relations with Panama as long as General Noriega remained in power, adding that the Administration would review its policy toward Panama. "If there are ways to improve that, we will be interested in making those improvements," he said.

Despite Mr. Baker's aversion to wide-ranging financial sanctions imposed against Panama last April, when Mr. Baker was Secretary of the Treasury, senior Administration officials said the Bush Administration had no intention of lifting the sanctions, even though they have hurt the largely pro-American middle class and have failed

to budge General Noriega.

General Woerner, whose troops have endured a campaign of harassment and intimidation at the hands of Panama's Defense Forces, also charged that the Panamanian leader was "moving adroitly to manipulate the May 1989 elections," so that the country's new civilian leader will be a staunch Noriega ally.

Panamanian opposition leaders have accused General Noriega of plotting to rig the elections. In a press briefing in Washington on Wednesday, Alberto Conte, an opposition leader who was sent into exile in December after he was released from prison, said the regime was tampering with voter lists, harassing opposition candidates and preparing for widespread ballot stuffing on the day of the election.

'Absence' of U.S. Policy Seen

But General Woerner reserved his harshest comments for Washington. He acknowledged that many in his audience would "most certainly" argue that there was what he called an "absence" of United States policy toward Panama.

He added: "For this country, which is so important regionally and to the United States strategically, I believe that we should be seriously debating and deciding now what our actions are to be on May 8 given a variety of scenarios. We ought to know what we plan to do in the event of a reasonably honest election, a grossly dishonest election, a postponed election or any other possible outcome."

General Woerner, who has clashed with both State Department and Pentagon officials in the past over their handling of Panama policy, said he was "a bit critical" of procedures for policy formulation because they sometimes involve up to 20 different agencies of government. He said he was "encouraged that there will be substantive changes in the procedures," but offered no details.

When asked whether General Woerner's remarks reflected Administration policy, an Administration official involved in Latin American issues said: "I don't know what motivates General Woerner. If he's got something to propose, he should propose it through proper channels."

Harassment Increasing

The general's remarks coincide with what officials at the military command in Panama say is an increase in harassment against American troops through limitations in limiting their freedom of movement in violation of the Panama Canal Treaty.

An unusually harsh news release issued Wednesday night from the command headquarters said that in the first six weeks of this year, Panama's Defense Forces have "stopped, searched, re-routed, detained or impounded" more United States Government vehicles than in the past eight months, when the harassment campaign first began.