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By LINDSEY GRUSON Special to The New York Times

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PANAMA, May 19 — Stepping up harassment of United States officials and employees here, Panamanian security forces have arrested at least 15 employees of the company that provides security for the American Embassy, officials said today. At least four security guards have taken refuge in the embassy.

Terrence Kneebone, a spokesman for the embassy, said the motives for the arrests remained unclear. Mr. Kneebone said it was not known if any of those arrested — most of them Panamanian nationals — had been charged.

"I don't want to be precipitous and call this an outright attack on the embassy," Mr. Kneebone said.

Mr. Kneebone announced the arrests the day after Defense Department officials in Washington said Panama had violated the canal treaties with the United States more than 1,200 times in the last 15 months by harassing United States military personnel and dependents. Panama has charged the United States with a similar number of violations of the treaties, which gives Panama sovereignty over the Canal by the end of the century.

War of Nerves

The arrests come amid growing tension between the United States and the regime of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, who was indicted last year by two Florida grand juries on Federal drug trafficking charges. Last week President Bush recalled the American Ambassador, Arthur C. Davis, and ordered a sharp cut in embassy staffing.

United States officials have also said in the last few days that the offices of agencies fighting drug-trafficking, money-laundering and the legal transfer of American high-technology equipment will be shut and their employees withdrawn to comply with Mr. Bush's order. Among the offices being closed or all but eliminated are those of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Customs Service and the Departments of Justice and Commerce.

The move is designed to limit General Noriega's ability to retaliate against Americans in the event of a direct confrontation. The United States fears that its employees and their dependents, whose names and addresses are frequently published in the Government-controlled press, could be attacked or taken hostage in a crisis. Many dependents have been evacuated to American bases or sent home.

Reducing the U.S. Presence

The evacuation is one of a series of measures to reduce American presence here to protest election fraud and violence by the Noriega regime. On May 10, paramilitary forces dressed in civilian clothes attacked and injured opposition leaders, who according to independent election monitors had defeated pro-Noriega candidates in the election May 7. The Government then moved to annul the election.

The staff of the American Embassy, which was reduced from 250 two years ago to about 100 at the beginning of April, will be cut to about 45 people by the end of this month, officials said. But the embassy will remain open and its Panamanian employees will be kept on, including security guards, who protect the embassy and American diplomats traveling through the country.

According to Mr. Kneebone, prosecutors and officers from the Panama's National Department of Investigation, which is the Panamanian equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, raided the home of Sergio Anquiza,

the owner of the security company, on Wednesday, searching it and seizing documents. They also arrested his wife, Isabel Anquiza.

The office sent her family and the embassy a message through her law-

yer that she would be set free if her brother, Alfonso Marino, the managing supervisor, turned himself in to the agency. He did that day. Mrs. Anquiza is still in custody, but her husband is in hiding.