

# Struggle Within the Military Appears to Be a Major Cause

By DAVID E. PITT

A bitter power struggle between rebellious junior officers and older members of Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega's inner circle appears to have been a major catalyst in the fighting that erupted in Panama yesterday, experts on Panamanian military affairs say.

"The sense all around is that this was something led by the middle-level ranks, that it was a battle between the old guys and the enlisted personnel," said Mercedes K. Morris, a spokeswoman for the United States Southern Command in Panama.

The apparent leader of the revolt, Maj. Moisés Giraldi Vega, is a middle-level officer who commands the Ur-raca battalion, a crack unit known for its role in crushing an attempted coup against General Noriega last year.

The battalion is in charge of security at Panamanian military headquarters in the capital, the scene of the abortive coup in March 1988 as well as of yesterday's fighting.

"These guys are very junior — a major, a few captains," said Prof.

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Richard Millett, a lecturer in Latin American studies at the University of Southern Illinois in Edwardsville, Ill.

Professor Millett and others said that many junior officers have become increasingly restive in recent months, with Panama's economy reeling and their own positions in the military hierarchy increasingly unclear because of the determination of General Noriega and his top commanders to hang on to power at any cost.

"One thing we've got to remember is that these officers have all got extended families, and they're all hurting bad because the economy is collapsing," the professor said.

A communiqué, broadcast shortly before loyalist troops began a furious counterattack in the Panamanian capital, described the rebellion as "an internal coup" whose chief aim was ending corruption in the military, a goal it said would be furthered by the forcible retirement of the general and his aides.

The general and his inner circle, the communiqué said, were violating Panamanian law by remaining in the military beyond a 20-year limit.

Although the communiqué called for new elections, it did not ask for popular support. Nor did it mention the possibility of ending military control of the country or of repealing any of the repressive decrees promulgated under General Noriega.

The communiqué was broadcast over Exitosa, a Government radio station, and Channel 4, an official television station. It said the revolt was an internal Panamanian matter and had no United States connection.

"This appears to have been entirely a barracks movement, without any civilian politicking," said Richard Koster, a longtime resident of Panama whose home is some five miles from the scene of the fighting yesterday. "They said nothing about restoring democracy, nothing about human rights. What they clearly meant to do was replace one military group with

another group."

The leadership of the uprising "cuts across several different units, including the Panamanian special forces, which is a small but very good unit," Professor Millett said.

At least three captains appear to have helped lead the uprising, including the special forces commander, Capt. Jesús Balma, and Capt. Javier Licona of the cavalry.

The objects of their revolt, besides General Noriega, included Colonels Marco Justines, Angel Mina, Julio Ow Young and Lorenzo Purcell, all top commanders close to the general who are widely believed to have close ties to Colombian drug traffickers.

The counterattack against the rebels appears to have been led by a combat unit known as Battalion 2000 and other troops that were rushed to the capital from Río Hato, a nearby military base.

There were reports that the loyalist troops were also assisted by members of a militia known as the Dignity Brigades. The head of the Brigades, a civilian, is also president of the Panamanian electric workers' union, a pro-Government group. There were reports that the rebels lost their radio and television link to the public after the electrical workers were ordered to cut off the power to the two stations.

"My private opinion," a Panamanian analyst said, "is that this uprising is a sign that the National Guard is finally beginning to break up from pressure on the institution from within. They're all trying to chew on a piece of the same cow."

There was widespread agreement that the aftermath would include a major crackdown on the civilian opposition and a purge of the military.

Late last night, Panamanians reached by telephone said the streets of the capital were empty not only of troops, but of police, indicating that General Noriega had ordered the armed forces to remain in their barracks as a precaution.

"They normally do that — it happened last year after the coup attempt," he said. "They need time to put everybody in one place until they decide who's reliable and who's not."