

# Account of Plot: Close Call for Noriega

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Special to The New York Times

PANAMA, Oct. 4 — Conspirators who tried to overthrow Gen. Antonio Manuel Noriega on Tuesday planned to trap him in his office and turn him over to United States authorities, a businessman with close ties to the Panamanian armed forces said today.

But the plot was foiled by bodyguards who opened fired with submachine guns when one of several soldiers waiting at the entrance of the general's office in army headquarters pulled a gun.

General Noriega's personal guards threw him to the floor and shielded him with their bodies, the businessman said, then shoved him down a corridor away from the shooting.

"It was very close," the businessman said, "very, very close."

The failed kidnapping set off a raging gunbattle between a force of about 200 anti-Noriega soldiers and hundreds of loyal forces that ended eight hours later.

The Government announced on television tonight that 10 soldiers were killed, 21 were wounded and 37 others taken prisoner. Five rebels, the Government said, took refuge on American bases. Telephones at the headquarters of the American military command here went unanswered this evening.

The Government said all the dead were rebels. Five civilians were reported among the wounded.

After the initial skirmish at General's Noriega's office, the general took cover in a bunker in the headquarters, according to American officials and Noriega supporters, and directed a counterattack that led to his freedom.

The Associated Press reported assertions by a Noriega aide, Lieut. Col. Arnulfo Castrejón, that the rebels captured the general and held him for hours but released him after loyal forces warned them that they would "face the consequences" if he was harmed.

Two opposition members who said they talked with soldiers who had been engaged in the battle said the rebels decided not to attack the bunker and lost the initiative.

## Opposition Leaders in Hiding

Guillermo Endara and Ricardo Arias Calderón, leaders of the opposition to General Noriega, went into hiding shortly before the fighting started, according to their supporters and Noriega loyalists.

Mr. Endara, who had obtained the largest number of votes in the presi-

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The rebels were reportedly thwarted by bodyguards at the military headquarters.

dential election last May before the results were annulled by General Noriega, had been on a hunger strike for two weeks, protesting the appointment of Francisco Rodriguez as President by the Noriega-dominated National Assembly on Sept. 1. Mr. Arias, who was the candidate for first vice president on Mr. Endara's slate, had been leading a campaign to encourage Panamanians to withhold taxes and payment for electricity and water.

There were reports that two of the insurrectionists had taken refuge at Fort Clayton, a United States Army base on the edge of the capital.

Officials at the United States Southern Command headquarters in Panama as well as officials at the United States Embassy refused to discuss the attempt against General Noriega.

"We cannot let any press on the base," said a secretary at the Southern Command press office this morning, "and we do not have anyone who can speak about the current crisis."

## Noriega Supporters Celebrate

The capital was quiet today, except for motorcades of what appeared to Government employees, blasting horns and waving flags.

Early this afternoon, as a motorcade rolled noisily past the army headquar-

ters where soldiers were plastering bullet holes and applying fresh paint, General Noriega, wearing a camouflage uniform, appeared at a barred window for a few minutes, grinning and alternately thrusting his right fist into the air and waving.

Later, with a band playing salsa music in the courtyard of the headquarters, he climbed up on an iron fence to shake hands with well-wishers who crowded the sidewalk during a tropical downpour.

The sprawling city of gleaming, oceanfront skyscrapers and small wood and brick houses ticked along as it does most days, with restaurants and shopping centers bustling, until early evening when an 8 P.M. curfew imposed on Tuesday went into effect. The American bases here remained on alert and military people and civilians were advised to avoid travel into the capital.

United States officials in Washington have acknowledged that they knew two days in advance that the move against General Noriega was coming, but they have insisted that they had nothing to do with it.

American officials here confirmed Panamanian charges that American troops blocked key roads between the besieged headquarters and other loyal Noriega units. But the Americans said the intention was not to interfere with troop movements but to protect "United States lives and property" at installations along the blocked roads.

The Americans also confirmed reports that American combat helicopters had circled over the army headquarters during the fighting, but they said they were merely observing the action. Every few minutes this afternoon, American Blackhawk helicopters swept over the warehouses and rickety houses flanking the army headquarters, but took care to avoid flying over the installation itself.

## U.S. Inaction Is Criticized

Americans and Panamanians said in interviews that they were surprised that the United States did not send troops to help the rebels as the battle dragged on and it became clear that they might fail.

"The Panamanians expected a lot from the United States," a Panamanian office secretary said. "We want to get rid of Noriega. But now people are starting to believe that we are never going to get any help from the U.S."

There is widespread dissatisfaction with General Noriega's authoritarian rule and the sharp decline in the economy resulting from American sanctions against Panama. But during the fighting Panamanians refrained from going into the streets to demonstrate support for the rebels.

"We were waiting to see what happened," one woman said. "We were all afraid we would get beaten and go to jail. There's no justice in this place."

Some Americans who say they would like to see General Noriega ousted say they oppose risking American soldiers' lives while Panamanians remain safely on the sidelines.

"Why should Americans sacrifice, when the Panamanians are not pouring into the streets?" one American official asked.

## No Clear-Cut Choice

Ramón Franco, a lawyer and opposition figure, said he and many others did not rally in support of the rebels because they represented a faction of the military that was dissatisfied with General Noriega but did not hold the promise of restoring democracy.

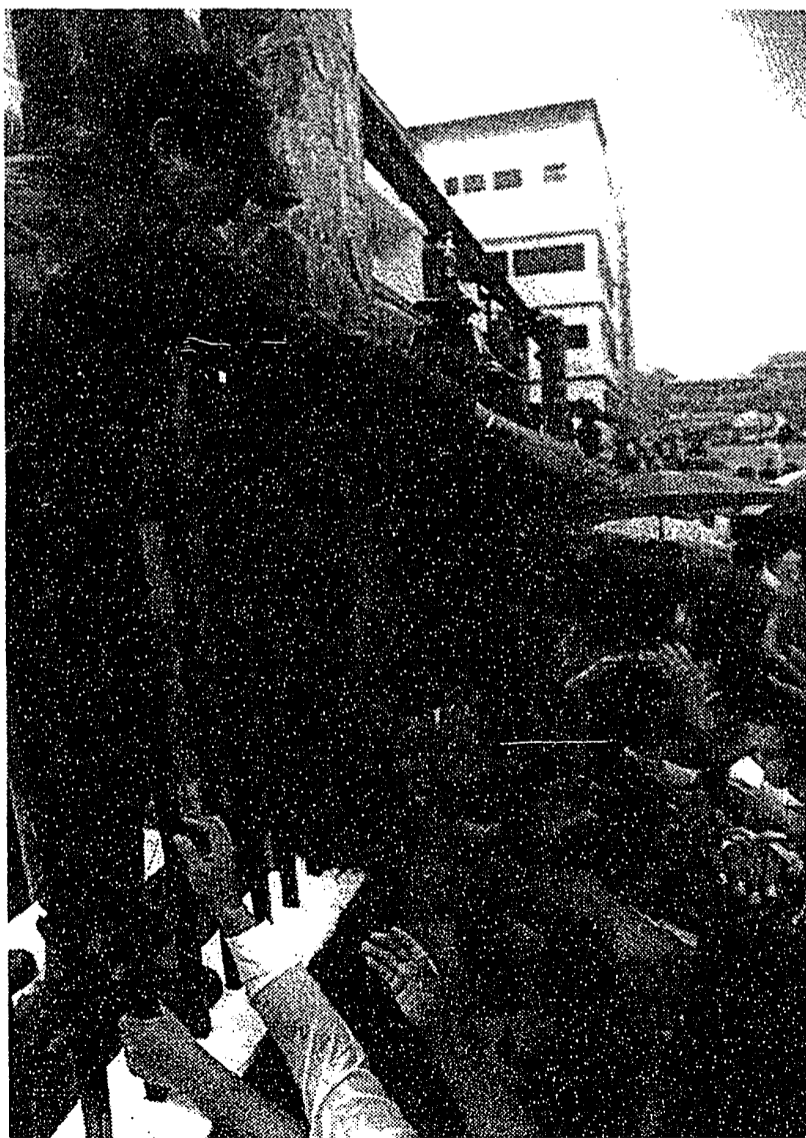
If the rebels had won, Mr. Franco asked, "What was I going to celebrate?"

In statements issued Tuesday while they briefly held the Government radio and television stations, the rebels variously said that they favored early elections and that they backed the recently appointed president, Mr. Rodríguez.

The businessman with close military ties, who said he had spoken to several officers who had been inside the headquarters defending General Noriega, said most of the rebels had been soldiers who were unhappy because they had been passed over for promotion. Their leaders, he said, had been driven mainly by personal ambition.

One American official said the plotters, members of the headquarters security force, apparently pinned their hopes solely on the capture of General Noriega and had not lined up support among other units, including the General's backers who would fall into step behind the victors.

"It was very badly planned," said an opposition supporter. "You cannot have a coup d'etat against one military compound."



Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, who was saved by his bodyguards in the attempted coup Tuesday in Panama, greeting supporters yesterday at a rally outside his headquarters.

Reuters