

Fires and U.S. Helicopters Transforming Panama City: The Scene Among ...

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Fighting in Panama: The Scene on the Ground

The Scene

Fires and U.S. Helicopters Transforming Panama City

PANAMA, Dec. 20 (Reuters) — Thick plumes of gray and white smoke rose over Panama City today, more than 12 hours after United States forces began a night attack to capture Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega.

In the impoverished Chorrillo section of the city, where General Noriega's headquarters was, flames lapped at the base of a smoke column that rose several thousand feet. An American military helicopter hovered overhead and occasional explosions could be heard.

"This is horrible," said a mother who had fled the area with members of her family. "Never in the history of our country has this been seen."

Residents said that many of the wooden houses near the headquarters had been hit by gunfire and artillery fire. Many had burned, and some residents said they had lost everything.

Fires Across the City

Around the city, scattered fires burned throughout the day.

A helicopter hovered over the waterfront on Panama Bay where the United States Embassy is. The embassy was surrounded by military vehicles.

At a news conference, Francisco Rodriguez, the provisional president in the previous military-backed Government, said that 60 people had died in the attack and hundreds had been wounded. He was flanked by body-

Among the damage: many homes destroyed near Noriega's headquarters.

guards carrying M-16 and AK-47 rifles.

He asserted that the government appointed by Panama's Council of State on Sept. 1, when the previous constitutionally elected government lapsed, was still in control of the country.

Mr. Rodriguez said the government of Guillermo Endara, the opposition candidate who apparently won the annulled elections last May, was not legitimate.

"I think that it is a disreputable act," he said of Mr. Endara's swearing-in as President at a United States military base early today. "The government does not exist."

In early afternoon, the government radio station continued to broadcast statements supportive of General Noriega. It called for loyal Panamanians to defend the country and broadcast communiqués from foreign governments condemning the attack.

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The bodies of civilians killed in the fighting lay on the floor of a hospital morgue in Panama City.

El País/Juancho Rodríguez via Associated Press

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