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A General's Secret Life?

Scandal in Panama

For a man accused of so many dark deeds, Panamanian strongman Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega was in a jaunty mood last week. He cut short a visit to Washington amid U.S. press reports that he has been involved for years in drug trafficking, money laundering and arms dealing, as well as intelligence gathering for Cuba, and that he may have ordered the murder of a political opponent. In Panama City he got together for drinks with top officials at the presidential palace. He wore a casual sport jacket and regaled his supporters with jokes late into the night. He accused the Americans and the opposition of plotting against Panama. "There are two kinds of gringos," Noriega said. "There are the gringos we all know, and then there are the gringeros. Those are the Panamanians who crawl for the gringos."

Washington has suspected Noriega of drug trafficking and money laundering for years. But according to The New York



CLAUDE URACCA—SYGMA

'There are two kinds of gringos': Noriega

Times and NBC News, U.S. intelligence agencies now have evidence that he has continued those activities as head of Panama's National Defense Force. The intelligence reports also implicated him in the killing of Hugo Spadafora, an outspoken dissident whose decapitated body was found in Costa Rica last fall. Noriega has denied any involvement in the murder.

Noriega's supporters accused Washington of a "malicious plot" to topple their leader and of trying to undermine the treaty—negotiated by Jimmy Carter—giving Panama control of the Panama Canal in the year 2000. "The way they describe No-

riega, he's the Rambo of Latin America," said one Foreign Ministry source. "That is an image I would think the gringos would be pleased with."

Noriega's opponents could not understand why the U.S. government and press had taken so long to close in on the Panamanian leader. "We've been saying these things for a long time," said Miguel Antonio Bernal, a prominent opposition figure. "It's truly sad that the U.S. government has played godfather to so much immorality. We have violence here that is in many ways worse than in Guatemala or El Salvador. It is subtle, but it is institutionalized."

Vital outpost: The Reagan administration has begun to distance itself from Noriega and his regime. U.S. Ambassador Arthur Davis has pressed the Panamanian government to solve the Spadafora murder case and has warned that a worsening pattern of human-rights abuses, corruption and drug trafficking could jeopardize further aid to Panama. But the administration is reluctant to move too hastily. Panama is a vital outpost not only because of the canal. It also serves as headquarters for the U.S. Southern Command and as a listening post for much of Latin America. For the time being, Washington may have to make do with Noriega's heavy-handed rule.

ANGUS DEMING with LIZ BALMASEDA in Panama and Washington bureau reports