

Noriega Met Drug Chiefs, Jury Is Told

Prosecution Alleges Face-to-Face Talks

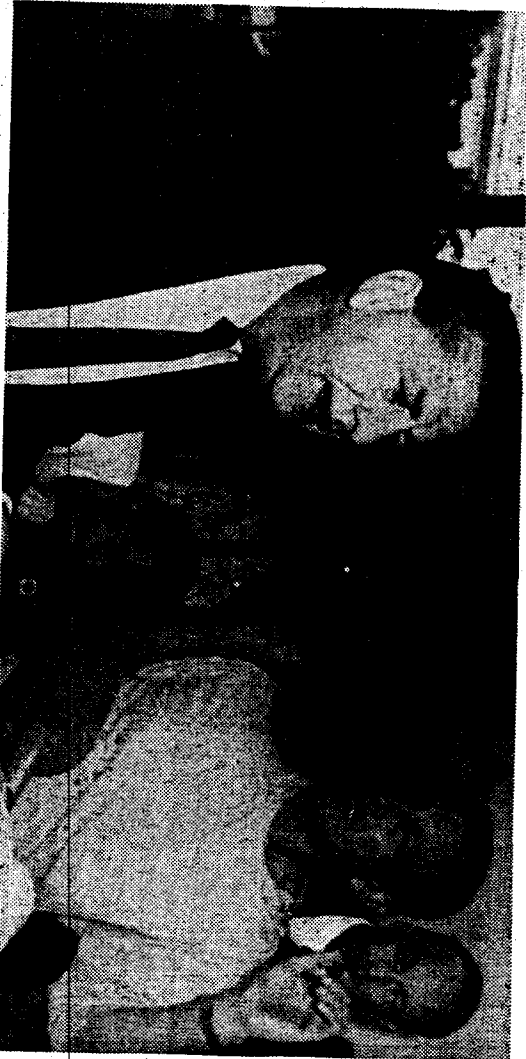
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By Michael Isikoff
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MIAMI, Sept. 16—A federal prosecutor opened the government's case against Manuel Antonio Noriega today by charging for the first time that the former Panamanian leader met secretly with chiefs of the Medellin drug cartel in Colombia eight years ago and arranged to protect their cocaine shipments through Panama.

Describing the defendant as "just a crooked cop," assistant U.S. attorney Michael P. Sullivan outlined a far-reaching "criminal enterprise" in which Noriega allegedly turned his country into a safe haven for the world's largest drug organization. While Noriega enforced Panama's drug laws and arrested traffickers, "payments would be made" and the traffickers released, Sullivan said.

"General Noriega never touched cocaine, never used cocaine; he probably never saw cocaine," Sullivan said in an hour-long preview of the government's case in Noriega's U.S. District Court trial on drug trafficking and racketeering charges. "He permitted others to engage in that illegal conduct, and he was paid for it."



Noriega defense lawyer Frank Rubino enters U.S. courthouse in Miami to hear prosecution present its opening arguments.

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In a move questioned by some defense lawyers here, Noriega's attorneys said they would defer their opening statement until the prosecution finishes its case, probably in two to three months.

But Noriega's lead attorney, Frank Rubino, fulfilled his promise to wage an aggressive defense as he cross-examined the government's first witness, Stephen Ropp, a University of Wyoming political science professor and expert on Panama.

Ropp offered sometimes rambling testimony about the history of Panama and evolution of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) under Noriega, their commander, forgetting details and telling the jury at one point, "I have a memory that's like an elephant who just had a lobotomy, unfortunately."

During cross-examination, Ropp acknowledged that he never spoke personally with PDF leaders and relied largely on media accounts for his information. Under Rubino's prodding, he also confirmed a central point of Noriega's defense—that the former general had a "long-standing relationship with the U.S. military" while allegedly working with drug traffickers.

The allegation that Noriega had face-to-face meetings with leaders of the Medellin cartel was the most significant new element that emerged today.

No references to such meetings exist in the 30-page indictment handed up against Noriega in February 1988, and prosecutors had alleged that Noriega dealt with the cartel through intermediaries or trusted aides who served as "bag-men."

But Sullivan told the nine women and three men on the jury that two convicted traffickers, Roberto Striedinger and Gabriel Taboada, would testify that, in the summer of 1983, Noriega was at a meeting in Medellin, Colombia, "to discuss

business with, to negotiate with the chiefs of the cartel."

The session occurred, he said, in the offices of two of the leading cartel traffickers, Escobar and Jorge Ochoa, both of whom are now jailed in Colombia.

Another potentially significant harbinger of the prosecution case was Sullivan's extensive description of testimony expected by Carlos Lehder, a notorious cartel trafficker and avowed admirer of Adolf Hitler who was sentenced to life imprisonment plus 130 years after a lengthy trial in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1988.

In a controversial agreement with prosecutors Aug. 28, Lehder said he would testify against Noriega in exchange for possible reduction in his sentence.

Sullivan said Lehder "is going to tell you straight up he never met or spoke to Noriega." Nevertheless, he then outlined what he described as important information Lehder would offer based on his high-ranking position in the Colombian cartel.

"From Lehder's perspective, Noriega was a nobody," Sullivan said. "He was, in his words, 'just a crooked cop.'" The cartel, he added, "was paying off hundreds of crooked cops."

Sullivan said Lehder would provide insight into the cartel's initial dealings with Noriega. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Noriega "did enforce the laws against narcotics" in Panama, and cartel leaders became irate that "this Noriega person is arresting our narcotics traffickers," Sullivan said.

As a result, cartel leaders "sat down and decided they were either going to eliminate him [Noriega] or they were going to buy him," Sullivan said Lehder would explain. "The decision was to buy him."

The government's decision to use Lehder has fueled criticism that, in the absence of hard docu-

mentary evidence that Noriega dealt drugs, prosecutors have been offering excessively lenient deals to admitted traffickers to obtain testimony against him.

"I don't think the government should be in the business of dealing with Carlos Lehder, period," Robert Merkle, the former U.S. attorney who prosecuted Lehder said in a telephone interview from Tampa. "This guy is a liar from beginning to end."

A low-key veteran prosecutor, Sullivan opened today with a dramatic flourish. Turning from his lectern and pointing to Noriega, he described the defendant as that "small man in his general's uniform . . . the last military strongman in Panama."

As Noriega sat impassively, listening to a translation through an earpiece, Sullivan continued: "He looks small here in this cavernous courtroom. But he was a giant in Panama."

But Sullivan continued with a dispassionate recounting of evidence in keeping with the Justice Department's longstanding description of the Noriega trial as "a routine drug case."

Sullivan said there would be testimony from former Panamanian politician Jose Blandon and others that, in July 1984, Noriega "had to go to Cuba" to have President Fidel Castro arbitrate a dispute with the cartel.

Despite Sullivan's allegations of face-to-face meetings, he did not mention direct eyewitness testimony of payoffs to Noriega. Describing a main government witness, former cartel pilot Floyd Carlton, Sullivan said: "Money was delivered by Floyd Carlton to Manuel Noriega. On all occasions, Manuel Noriega wouldn't receive the money in hand from Floyd Carlton. He would use an intermediary."