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# Defense Report

AUSA



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## **Political Unrest in Panama Poses an American Dilemma**

Among the several crises currently boiling in the Central American region, the one that has the highest relative portent for United States national security concerns the violent demonstrations and general strikes that have jarred Panama's military leadership in recent weeks.

Nowhere in Central America is the situation more volatile than in Panama where a weak and suspect economy has been shaken by an unstable political situation. Panama's current problems were brought to a head with the firing of Col. Roberto Diaz Herrera, second in command to Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the man who actually controls all in Panama.

Following his ouster, Diaz charged Noriega with murder, corruption and electoral fraud. These charges gave rise to violent street demonstrations which were suppressed by the military only after the imposition of a nationwide state of emergency. In response, there ensued nearly three weeks of general strikes which severely tested the already faltering economy and left the nation's leadership in very deep trouble.

The strategic and economic implications for the United States which grow out of Panamanian unrest are grave indeed. Some 15 percent of all U.S. exports and imports pass through the Panama Canal. Militarily, the U.S. Southern Command is headquartered there and, in addition to commanding the 10,000 U.S. troops at 11 bases in Panama, it controls all U.S. military assistance and operations throughout Central and South America.

There are many Panamanian voices crying out for full restoration of their constitutional rights and a thorough investigation of the charges against Gen. Noriega. Others seek to get the military out of politics and back to the barracks as a move toward free and open democracy.

For our part, the U.S. Government is torn between supporting the present government as a force of stability which protects the Canal and encouraging the establishment and continuity of democratically-elected Panamanian governments. How we play this one out could have serious implications for the future of most of the North American continent.