

Number of Victims of U.S. Invasion of Panama Still Unknown 27 Years On



Panama City, December 20 (RHC)-- Panamanians marked the 27th anniversary Tuesday of the 1989 U.S. invasion of the Central American country as the exact number of victims remains unknown more than a quarter of a century after the events.

But this year's anniversary also comes as a breakthrough investigation is finally underway to uncover the truth of the invasion and its exact death toll in hopes of bringing closure to the families of victims and formally honoring the bloody history in Panama.

Speaking about the importance of the investigations so many years later despite challenges such as dwindling numbers of first-hand witnesses, commission member Juan Planells told Panama's TVN news in an interview aired Monday that there was no justification for the 1989 invasion, which could be an underlying reason behind longstanding resistance to an exhaustive investigation from some groups.

"There has been confrontation when we try to discuss the causes of the invasion," Planells said. "There has been a desire to avoid what is inevitable, which is investigating the facts so Panamians can decide what happened in that period and so that the deaths of so many innocent Panamanians who suffered the

consequences of this invasion will not be hidden.”

On December 20, 1989, over 27,000 U.S. soldiers invaded Panama as part of President George H. W. Bush’s “Operation Just Cause.” The invasion was allegedly aimed to carry out the arrest of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega on alleged drug trafficking charges. Noriega was formerly a close U.S. ally and CIA informant aiding U.S. counterinsurgency operations in the region.

However, the invasion, which came after failed coup attempts and economic sanctions in the wake of Noriega falling out of Washington’s favor, is widely interpreted as part of U.S. efforts to maintain a supportive government in Panama and U.S. domination in the region.

The brutal military operation resulted in up to 3,000 civilian and military victims. Many of the bodies remained unidentified after being burned and piled up in the streets.

But different parties report vastly different statistics, highlighting the need for a thorough investigation even 27 years after the fact. While the U.S. military estimates just 202 Panamanian civilians were killed in the invasion, the Commission for the Defense of Human Rights in Central America claims the figure is vastly higher at between 2,500 and 3,000 people killed.

The U.S. has never compensated the survivors impacted in the invasion or the families of the victims. On the anniversary of the invasion last year, officials announced plans to launch a Truth Commission to dig up the history once and for all and provide clarity around what happened during those dark days in Panama.

The commission, which officially launched in July, aims to identify the victims and reclaim collective memory around the invasion in the name of establishing truth nearly three decades later. The investigation is expected to pave the way for reparations to be paid to families of the victims and for the history to be honored in school curriculums and public monuments.

Panama had a separate truth commission that investigated abuses committed under the military dictatorships of Generals Omar Torrijos and Manuel Noriega between 1968 and 1989, which found that the regimes were guilty of torture and “cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment” of victims.

Torrijos, generally regarded as a left-wing nationalist who wanted to recoup control over the Panama Canal, died in a mysterious plane crash in 1981. Noriega has served jail time in the United States and France and is now imprisoned in Panama for alleged crimes against humanity.

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