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DOLE: ADMINISTRATION "STONE-WALLING" ON PANAMANIAN DRUG FILES

Senator Bob Dole said today that his repeated efforts during the past two months to secure United States government files on the possible involvement of General Omar Torrijos and other Panamanian leaders in international drug-trafficking have met with nothing but "excuse" and "stone-walling" by the Administration.

The full text of Senator Dole's statement follows:

"Mr. President, I feel the time has come to comment on the lack of cooperation I have received in my efforts to secure information on the possible involvement of Panamanian General Omar Torrijos in drug-trafficking operations. My efforts to gain copies of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration files on this matter, through legitimate and customary channels, have met with delay and excuse at every turn. It is one of the best examples of "stone-walling" that I've had the misfortune to experience.

It has now been a full two months since I first filed a "Freedom of Information" request for copies of specific DEA files. To date, not so much as a single paragraph from those files has been provided to me by DEA officials, despite their repeated verbal promises that my request could and would be complied with. Let me briefly review the events surrounding this case.

Mr. President, the members of this body will recall that, on October 13 of this year, I advised the United States Senate of certain allegations I had received of direct involvement by General Omar Torrijos and other members of his Regime in drug-trafficking in the United States and elsewhere. I suggested that these charges, if true, could prove relevant to the Panama Canal Treaty issue. Certainly, the credibility and the personal integrity of General Torrijos and his colleagues would bear upon their reliability as Panama's guarantors of the new Treaty; and, since ratification of these Treaties would definitely strengthen the political and financial status of the Torrijos Regime, it is important for us to know in advance if we will be bolstering a corrupt government which facilitates the transport of illegal drugs to our own shores. For that reason, I stated that the Justice Department should make its findings on this matter known immediately to Congress, prior to consideration of the Treaties.

The following day, October 14, I filed a "Freedom of Information" request with the Drug Enforcement Administration, requesting access to 45 specific files which allegedly contain information on Torrijos' involvement with the drug-trafficking operations. At the request of the Administrator, I did not release those 45 file codes to the public media.

One week later, On October 21, I sent a second letter to DEA Administrator Bensinger containing excerpts from documents that were represented to me as copies of documents in DEA files. Those excerpts made specific reference to Omar Torrijos as being involved with narcotics and contraband traffic. I asked the Administrator to confirm the authenticity of those documents, and to advise me in writing as to whether the reports on Torrijos had been verified or disproven by DEA investigators. I have never received a response to that letter.

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On October 26, I met with DEA Administrator Peter Bensinger on this matter. He advised me that some of the files in question had been turned over to the Senate Intelligence Committee. Mr. Bensinger further advised me that before any of the files could be turned over to me, they would have to be screened for removal of any information which might endanger national security or violate personal privacy rights. I acknowledged this, and reaffirmed by "Freedom of Information" request for those documents.

A phone call to my office on November 8 from the DEA Administrator's Office advised me that I could expect to receive approved documents during the week of November 13. A week later, another phone call from the Administrator's Office informed me that the documents would not be forthcoming as promised. This was attributed to special difficulties in securing all of the information I had requested. At that time, the Administrator's Office was unable to advise just when I might receive the first delivery of some of the files I had requested.

Consequently, in accordance with established procedures under the "Freedom of Information Act," I filed a formal appeal with the United States Attorney General on November 18. I advised the Attorney General at that time that I considered the information I had requested from the DEA clearly releasable under the "Freedom of Information Act," and requested his review of the case. I also requested a written response from the Attorney General within 20 working days. Those 20 days have now elapsed without an official response to that appeal.

I also want to emphasize that it has been a full two months since my initial "Freedom of Information" request was submitted.

Mr. President, it seems totally unreasonable that, at the end of two months, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has not even been able to provide me with sanitized versions of the files which they agree I am entitled to under the "Freedom of Information Act." And I think their delay and uncooperativeness on the matter can only fuel public suspicion about what those documents may say about the involvement of Panamanian General Omar Torrijos and his colleagues in illegal operations.

As a member of the United States Senate who is being asked to pass judgment on proposed Panama Canal Treaties, I think I am at least entitled to a direct denial of my request if these files are not to be provided to me. Instead, the Administration seems determined to extinguish the matter through procrastination and excuses. If this is their strategy, then they must accept the consequences of public opinion and Senate reaction.

Mr. President, I hope that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Department of Justice, may yet see fit to cooperate and comply with my legitimate request for access to files containing information on General Torrijos' involvement with drug-trafficking operations. But I have yet to see any evidence of an earnest effort on their part to facilitate my investigation of the matter.