

Noriega's supporters rallied by his possible return to Panama

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One paragraph hints of a once passionate friendship torn apart by prison. It is too intimate, she says, to be reproduced in a newspaper. The letter ends with the words "subliminal kisses." It is signed "Mantonor."

That would be Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the former Panamanian dictator captured in a 1989 invasion by U.S. troops and now serving a 30-year sentence in Miami-Dade County on drug charges.

Noriega, 70, is set to be paroled Sept. 9 after serving nearly 18 years of his sentence. He qualified for early release because he was automatically eligible for parole and he earned time for good behavior.

What happens afterward is unclear. The Panamanian and French governments each want him to serve prison sentences for other crimes.

But Gayle de Best, 55, who kept her friendship with Noriega a secret for almost two decades, and a small group of other Noriega supporters are now speaking out on his behalf and saying they hope to greet Noriega with flowers, not handcuffs.

She says Noriega looked out for poor people like her in a way that Panama's later leaders have failed to do.

"A rich person," she says, "can never perceive Noriega like us poor folks saw him."

STILL A WANTED MAN

Noriega has quietly served his sentence in an apartmentlike cell at the low-security Federal Correctional Institution in southwest Miami-Dade, equipped with exercise machines, a telephone and a color TV set. His lawyer, Frank Rubino, says Noriega wants to return to a life of quiet retirement in Panama.

That may not happen.

U.S. officials say the French government plans to file an extradition request so he can serve a sentence there for allegedly moving Colombian drug money through Panama to banks in France.

Panama wants Noriega to serve multiple prison terms for, among other things, the murders of critic Hugo Spadafora and 10 leaders of a failed 1989 coup against Noriega. Opinion polls here suggest that more than 60 percent of Panamanians want Noriega to do jail time in Panama.

"These are firm sentences that [Noriega] needs to come serve," said Panamanian First Vice President Samuel Lewis Navarro.

The Panama City that Noriega would find if he returns has a neo-Miami air, with gleaming SUVs, jammed restaurants and soaring high-rises. The economy is booming, the country just signed a free-trade agreement with the United States, and the Panama Canal is getting a big expansion.

President Martín Torrijos, son of Gen. Omar Torrijos, the country's ruler from 1968 to 1981, is popular. Noriega, the National Guard's intelligence chief under Omar Torrijos, took power after Torrijos died in a 1981 plane crash.

But 37 percent of Panama's 3.2 million citizens live below the poverty line, according to government statistics.

In Gayle de Best's hometown of Colón, at the Caribbean end of the canal, tourists are bused directly to the duty-free shopping enclave. The official poverty rate for the predominantly Afro-Panamanian city is 43 percent.

PROBLEMS ARE `WORSE`

"We have problems that are worse than a dictatorship," says de Best, who twice ran for mayor of Colón and now does community work for children of drug-addicted parents. The elected governments that succeeded Noriega have ``made us yearn for the days of military rule. It should not be this way."

De Best recognizes that there were human-rights abuses under Noriega. But she says the military was more caring for the poor and the streets were safer.

She says Noriega, now a born-again Christian, is probably more interested in going door-to-door to spread the Gospel than in furthering any personal ambitions.

She believes that he deserves a warm return home, so she is organizing the Colón chapter of a "National Welcome Home Committee" known as "an embrace in freedom." So far, two such committees have been formed. "Noriega," de Best says, ``is coming to receive his embrace."

De Best met Noriega in July 1988, when she was a tough Panama Canal security officer and a member of Noriega's infamous "dignity battalions" -- bands of street thugs that beat up members of the opposition.

"We looked into each other's eyes and connected," she says of her first encounter with Noriega, who considered himself an Afro-descendant like de Best. He visited her, she says, and she cooked meals for him.

After Noriega's ouster, the dignity battalions faded away and de Best lost her job. She sold Caribbean-style pickled pigs' feet on the street to support her three children.

One person who attended a session to organize celebrations for Noriega's return is José Squires, a municipal employee. He says "without doubt" that President Torrijos will pardon Noriega. And he complains bitterly of the rising crime in Colón.

"If this is democracy, I prefer the way things were before," he says. ``Here, you get shot for nothing."

De Best claims several thousand adherents throughout Panama in the free-Noriega movement. But she acknowledges that only 60 residents of Colón have signed petitions for his return, and that a June 5 organizing meeting drew only five activists. She says she is just getting started and there will be a snowball effect once his release date nears.

"Folks have mixed feelings about this," de Best says. ``I have been attacked, I have been criticized. But whatever happens, he is going to be released."