

OPERATION "JUST CAUSE"

**The Human Cost of Military Action
in Panama**

**A Report by
Physicians for Human Rights
October 1991**

OPERATION "JUST CAUSE"

The Human Cost of Military Action
in Panama

A Report by
Physicians for Human Rights

October 1991

PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) is a national organization of health professionals whose goal is to bring the skills of the medical profession to the protection of human rights. PHR works to prevent the participation of doctors in torture, other serious abuses and administration of the death penalty; to defend imprisoned health professionals; to stop physical and psychological abuses of citizens by governments; and to provide medical and humanitarian aid to victims of repression.

Since its founding in 1986, PHR has conducted over thirty-five missions concerning twenty-three countries: Brazil, Burma, Cambodia, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kenya, Kuwait, Panama, Paraguay, the Republic of Korea, Sudan, Turkey, the United States, the USSR, and Yugoslavia. PHR adheres to a policy of strict impartiality and is equally concerned with the medical consequences of human rights abuses regardless of the ideology of the offending government or group.

(c) 1991 by Physicians for Human Rights

Copies of this report are available from Physicians for Human Rights, 100 Boylston Street, Suite 620, Boston, MA 02116, Tel. 617/623-1930; Fax 617/623-7234.

ISBN 1-879707-01-2 (\$6.00)

CONTENTS

PREFACE	i
INTRODUCTION	1
Need for the Inquiry	1
The PHR Mission	2
Methodology	3
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	4
THE MILITARY INTERVENTION	5
Political and Historical Background	5
Operation "Just Cause"	9
The Human Cost	12
CASUALTIES	16
Assessment of Deaths	16
Official Accountings of Civilian Deaths	16
PHR Analysis of the Official Figures of Civilian Deaths	18
Panamanian Military Deaths	23
Ratio of Civilian to Military Deaths	23
Assessment of Injuries	24
THE FATE OF DISPLACED PERSONS	27
PSYCHIATRIC TRAUMA	32
The Invasion as a Psychological Stressor	32
Assessing Psychiatric Morbidity: Interviews with Victims	35
Findings	37
Psychopathology	37
Disruption of social structure	39
Understandings of trauma and loss	40
CONCLUSION	45
APPENDIX	
Case Testimonies	
Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Depressive Disorders	

PREFACE

In February 1990, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) sent a team of three physicians to Panama to investigate the medical and psychological consequences of the U.S. invasion in December 1989. We did so because we believe that the American and world public has a right to know the human costs of the conflict.

Almost from its inception in 1986, PHR has sent medical teams into the field to investigate and report on the consequences of conflict in a variety of settings. In 1987, we reported on the effects of the use of massive quantities of tear gas in South Korea's major cities. In the same year, we investigated the use of indiscriminate force by General Noriega's forces against unarmed civilian demonstrators in Panama. In 1988, we sent a team to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to chronicle the deliberate beatings and use of lethal ammunition by Israel's occupying forces. In that year, we also traveled to Turkey, where our team interviewed Kurdish victims of Iraqi use of poison gas. In 1989, we reported on Soviet use of chemical weapons against peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi and on the violations of medical neutrality against hospital facilities and medical personnel in El Salvador's civil war. In 1990, in addition to the mission to Panama, we began to document the medically related violations of human rights in the Gulf Crisis beginning with the invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Finally in 1991, five additional missions examined the Gulf War consequences. PHR teams also assessed the effect on civilians of civil conflict in Burma and land mine injuries in Cambodia.

PHR joins with others in the human rights community in monitoring compliance with the Geneva Conventions and international human rights laws. PHR's special role is to bring medical, public health and psychiatric skills to the investigation of abuses and their consequences.

While others have called into question the legality of the invasion of Panama as well as the United States' compliance with the laws of war in conducting the invasion, we use our insights as medical professionals to examine the health-related consequences of the conflict. We recognize that even in situations where there is no clear-cut illegality, there may be serious or even catastrophic loss to civilians and needless suffering and cruelty to soldiers and prisoners of war.

Jonathan Fine, M.D.
Executive Director

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was written by the delegation members and Eric Rosenthal, a student at Georgetown University Law Center and research assistant to Professor M. Gregg Bloche. Nancy Arnison of the PHR staff served as the principal editor. Barbara Ayotte, Jonathan Fine, Jack Geiger, and Susannah Sirkin, all of PHR; Hurst Hannum of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University; and Nancy Heneson of Washington D.C. also contributed to the editing of this manuscript.

PHR is especially grateful to the Aaron Diamond, Ford, J. Roderick MacArthur, Joyce Mertz-Gilmore and Reebok foundations, the John Merck Fund, the Fund for Free Expression and the members of PHR -- too numerous to mention -- for financial support that made this report possible.