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N-FMB

Panama fighting subsides;
missionaries wait it out

By Mary Speidel & Donald Martin

PANAMA CITY, Panama (BP)--Heavy combat subsided Dec. 21 following the U.S. military intervention in Panama, but at least two Southern Baptist missionary families reported continued fighting in their neighborhoods.

They also confirmed reports of "dignity battalions" -- groups of armed men loyal to deposed Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega -- roaming the streets.

However, all 15 missionaries and three volunteers in Panama are safe and remaining indoors, according to Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board officials. Other Southern Baptist workers assigned to Panama are in the United States or in language school in Costa Rica.

"For right now they plan to stay put," said Joe Bruce, director of Southern Baptist work in Middle America. "We feel like they're safer dispersed than they would be all together. They'll just stay where they are until the situation stabilizes enough for them to move around the country."

Missionaries James and Dorothy Gilbert, who live near the Marriott Hotel in Panama City, woke up at 4:30 a.m. Dec. 21 to the sounds of heavy fighting in their area. The fighting lasted for about 45 minutes.

"Within a couple of blocks of here, there were planes flying over, and there appeared to be a lot of anti-aircraft fire," said Gilbert. The Gilberts, both from Jackson, Miss., said they were in "good shape," and planned to stay home and keep in contact with other missionaries and Panamanian Baptists.

The previous afternoon, a U.S. helicopter flew by the Gilberts' house. A Panamanian soldier who lives behind the Gilberts opened fire on it, but it flew away without returning fire, Gilbert said.

Later that day, one of Noriega's "dignity battalions" began looting a store down the street from them, Gilbert reported. The armed band forced opened the store's door and went up and down the street telling people to come take anything they wanted, said Gilbert. On the next block, another band commandeered a car.

Meanwhile, heavy fighting took place across the street from the Southern Baptist mission office in Panama City, according to an eyewitness report Gilbert received.

The eyewitness saw U.S. troops on top of the two-story mission office building firing at a Panamanian military building across the street, Gilbert said. The fighting left the military building, an office of the Panamanian secret police, heavily damaged and burning. The eyewitness did not know if the mission office sustained damage, Gilbert said.

Gilbert plans to talk to Panamanian Baptist leaders about what relief work will be needed. Immediate assessment is difficult because no one can leave home safely, he said. Medical supplies likely will top the list.

Nearby, missionaries Richard and Sharon Cook also heard continued fighting and reported that a neighbor saw a few "dignity" bands in their neighborhood as well as store lootings. The Cooks are from Tulsa, Okla., and Findlay, Ohio, respectively.

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In the Balboa area of the city, near Noriega's headquarters, "things ... are extremely calm," reported missionary Mary Mangrum of Nashville. "There's been some isolated fighting and incidents perhaps but it's better than it was yesterday (Dec. 20).

"The missionaries located within the city are very secure within their homes at the present time. They are obviously keeping a very close watch and an ear to what's heard on the radio as well as the television, and we're just being extremely cautious."

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N-HMB

Bivocational ministers
plan national association

By Jim Newton

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JACKSON, Miss. (BP)--A national fellowship, the Southern Baptist Bivocational Ministers Association, has been organized to encourage "tentmaker" ministries in the denomination.

About 30 bivocational ministers from throughout the nation voted to establish the fellowship during a meeting in Jackson, Miss., just prior to the annual sessions of the National Council for Bivocational Ministries this fall.

Ken Cook of Jackson, a bivocational minister who works with Mississippi Power and Light, said the two organizations would work together on similar objectives but would have different roles.

The association will sponsor an annual meeting, probably in connection with the Southern Baptist Convention, offering an opportunity for fellowship and affirmation of bivocational ministers.

Cook was elected chairman of a steering committee to draft a constitution and bylaws for the association and make plans for future meetings.

The council gives guidance to the work of Dale Holloway, national consultant on bivocational ministries for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

During the council's meeting, board Vice President Charles Chaney announced that Holloway would become the first of seven regional consultants to coordinate an intensified emphasis on bivocationalism by the board.

"Bivocational ministries will occupy a more strategic place in the overall strategy of the Home Mission Board in the years ahead than it has in the past," Chaney said.

Chaney, vice president for extension, said the board plans to intensify use of bivocationals to start new churches, especially in black and ethnic communities. One man, such as Holloway, cannot serve the needs of bivocational leaders across the nation, he noted.

"We need to move toward regional leadership in bivocationalism in the 21st century," Chaney said. "We need to think in terms of ethnic, racial and geographic diversity."

In times of declining financial resources, the board will phase in gradual support of six or seven regional consultants to direct this work and will seek to involve men who are currently bivocational ministers in such roles, he said.

"It is almost impossible for a monovocational church leader to have the perception to discern the special problems and needs of bivocational church leaders," he explained.

Chaney emphasized the need for involvement of bivocational ministers in starting new churches, stressing, "To wait on full salary, buildings with ample land and full academic training to thoroughly evangelize and intentionally disciple North America is to wait too long."

Establishing 10 churches with 100 members each, led by bivocational pastors, is more effective than to have one church with 1,000 members led by a full-time pastor, Chaney noted. Bivocational strategy is four times more effective in evangelism and church growth efforts, he estimated.

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In another speech to the executive council, Jeff Lewis, associate director of Mission Service Corps for the HMB, said it is not enough to affirm, support, encourage and recruit people to become involved in bivocational ministries.

"Our problem is not just finding bivocational ministers but in convincing churches to accept bivocational ministers," Lewis said. "One associational leader told me he knew of 10 churches in his association that would do better with a bivocational pastor, but he can't talk the churches into it."

Both Lewis and Chaney stressed the importance of communicating the theology of the call of all Christians to ministry and service, breaking down the barriers between clergy and laity and emphasizing the concept of shared ministry.

Bob Salley, director of the National Fellowship of Baptist Men, encouraged bivocational ministers to take advantage of resources of his organization in locating and securing jobs for bivocational church planters.

The council re-elected Glen Ailshie, a bivocational minister from Mullins, S.C., as president; re-elected Cook as first vice president; elected Claude Slate, bivocational pastor from Fort Worth, Texas, as second vice president; and elected Frank Phillips, bivocational pastor from Gainesville, Fla., as recording secretary.

The council also adopted a resolution expressing appreciation to the board for its "generous support" of the council's efforts and for its "crucial role" in encouraging bivocational ministries.

About 65 people from 16 states attended the council meeting, a 25 percent increase over the previous high attendance. Sessions were held at Day Star Baptist Church in Florence, Miss., where Holloway is pastor.

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3 'exemplary' bivocational
pastors honored for achievement

N-HMB

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JACKSON, Miss. (BP)--Baptist pastors from North Carolina, Texas and Alabama were honored as "exemplary bivocational ministers" during presentations at the Southern Baptist National Council for Bivocational Ministries.

Receiving the awards were George Revis, a church planter in Wilson, N.C.; Lester R. Grubbs, pastor of an inner-city mission in Fort Worth, Texas; and Michael Murphree, pastor of a rural church 30 miles south of Montgomery, Ala.

Dale Holloway, national consultant on bivocational ministries for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, praised the work of the three ministers, saying they provide exemplary models of effective bivocational ministry in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Revis, pastor of one of 22 predominantly black Southern Baptist churches in North Carolina, was recognized for his role in starting a new black Baptist congregation in Wilson. Glory Baptist Church, which Revis started in January 1988, grew from 12 members to almost 120 members within one year.

Revis, who supports his family with a second job as process engineer at the Bridgestone-Firestone Rubber Company in Wilson, is believed to be the first black Baptist minister ordained to the ministry by a predominantly white Southern Baptist church. Glory Church is sponsored by Grace Baptist Church in Wilson, which ordained Revis.

Grubbs, pastor of Central Baptist Mission in Fort Worth, was recognized for his ministry to people who live in government-subsidized housing in the downtown section of the city.

Employed by the Tandy Corporation as a bid specialist responsible for sales of computer systems to business and industrial firms, Grubbs also is a chaplain for the Volunteer of America halfway houses for former prison inmates.

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Grubbs has been pastor of the inner-city mission, sponsored by Sagamore Hill Baptist Church of Fort Worth, since 1986.

Murphree, pastor of Mountain Hill Baptist Church, has led the rural congregation to almost double its total Southern Baptist Cooperative Program unified budget contributions and baptisms during the four years he has been pastor of the 130-member church.

Murphree, who works at the surplus property warehouse for the state of Alabama, also led his church to become one of the top 10 supporters of the Montgomery Baptist Association, giving about 3.5 percent of its budget to support the association.

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Retired Tennessee exec
dies at Chattanooga home

N-CO
(Tenn.)

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CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. (BP)--Ralph Norton, retired executive secretary of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, died Dec. 19 at his home in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Norton, 76, had cancer and had been ill for several months.

Norton became executive secretary of the convention Jan. 1, 1973. Before accepting the position, he had been pastor of Red Bank Baptist Church in Chattanooga since 1948. Norton retired from the TBC post in 1978.

The Chattanooga native held degrees from Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Norton worked on various TBC and Southern Baptist Convention agencies, boards and committees. He was president of the TBC in 1956.

Norton's funeral was Dec. 21 at Red Bank Church.

He is survived by three children -- Ralph Jr. of Houston; David of Chattanooga; and Linda Havron of Chattanooga -- and six grandchildren. Norton's wife, Louise, died last June.

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✓ Feed fire'
Leavell urges

By Breena Kent Paine

N-CO
(NOBTS)

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NEW ORLEANS (BP)--"Poke the fire" and don't let it burn out, President Landrum P. Leavell I told 115 candidates for graduation during December commencement exercises at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

"There are many God-called men and women on the shelf today claiming burnout," Leavell said. "Feed the fire. Don't come to the point of burnout. Know that the possibility exists and work to prevent it (through) daily prayer; daily Bible study, not for the purpose of bringing a devotional or preaching a sermon but studying the word of God for the purpose of feeding the fire; ... witnessing to the lost; practicing a lifestyle of biblical stewardship."

"If you fail to feed a fire, it won't continue to burn indefinitely. The charisma of God if you will burn low and go out either by neglect or by willful disobedience, and that's equivalent to putting a non-combustible material in the fire."

"Sometimes fires burn out by failure to remove the ashes. Keep the dross out of your life by honest confession of sin and by genuine repentance and turning from sin."

"The charisma that God gave you was given in order that you might bless other people; it was not given for your own personal selfish use. For that to happen, your ministry is going to have to be controlled and directed (through) discipline. Say 'no' to everything that's unclean, immoral, tainted, questionable; ... say 'no' to the old way of life you followed before you became a Christian."

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To keep burning throughout the night, Leavell said, fires need banking: "Bank your fire by daily recommitment to the call of God and to the service of humanity. That kind of recommitment will ensure that the fire will be stirred up and burning all the days that God will give you on of this earth.

"There will be days when you're going to want to quit. People are going to get in your hair and on your nerves.

"When that happens, bank your fire by recalling ... that moment when you suddenly knew God had ... designed you to serve him in a unique capacity.

"The major contribution that you or I may make to the Christian church in our lifetimes could well be a life of holiness by which all of the unholy lives can be judged.

"Don't miss what he has in store for you. Every day that you live, poke the fire."

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BP photo available upon request from New Orleans Seminary.

Vietnamese farmers visit Baptist
rural center in the Philippines

By Michael Chute

N-FMB

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DAVAO CITY, Philippines (BP)--Despite a cutback on cultural and educational exchanges in recent months, the Vietnamese government allowed 19 Vietnamese farmers and teachers to study agricultural techniques at Southern Baptists' Rural Life Center in the Philippines for three weeks in November.

Vietnamese officials permitted the exchange because the project provided practical training in combating Vietnam's most severe problem -- feeding its people. Providing food for nearly 67 million people is a constant struggle in Vietnam. Food shortages are complicated by depletion of natural resources -- soil erosion, forest cutting and overworked land.

"We can ship tankers of feeding rice into Vietnam every year or we can try to do something about the root problem," said Marvin Raley, Indochina program director for Southern Baptists' aid organization, Cooperative Services International, which initiated the project. "The Vietnamese really don't want handout rice. They want to find solutions to their own problems."

That attitude was evident in the Vietnamese who came to the Rural Life Center to study ways to raise farmers' standard of living. They told project coordinators the training could make a significant contribution in helping alleviate hunger in Vietnam. The group included small-scale farmers, district agricultural officials and professors from five agriculture universities.

Vietnam's government "selected a good cross-section of agricultural people who weren't concerned with how they could make more money," said Jack Shelby, CSI's Hong Kong-based administrator. "The real concern was how to feed the nation. Their people are going hungry. As farmers and teachers, they see themselves as the solution to that problem if they can make better use of the soil and natural resources."

None of the farmers had traveled out of their provinces before, project coordinators said. Many came from northern Vietnam's Bac Thai Province, the cradle of the Vietnamese communist revolution. Mistrust of the United States and its allies still runs high in that region.

The exchange project, funded by Southern Baptist contributions to world hunger relief, took 18 months to plan. It involved CSI field personnel, Vietnamese officials, and Fred and Minh Kauffman, Thailand-based development specialists on contract with CSI. The project called for coordination efforts between religious and government officials in Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines. The Vietnamese and Philippine governments required security checks on all participants.

"It was an extremely complicated thing to pull off," said Raley. "It required the Kauffmans working around the clock the last six weeks to make it fly. In the realm of the Holy Spirit, it came together at the last minute. It was not just our idea; it was meant to be."

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The Rural Life Center, directed by Southern Baptist agriculturist Harold Watson, has developed several agricultural techniques suited to the tropical environment found throughout most of Southeast Asia. The center teaches SALT, or Sloping Agricultural Land Technology, involving use of sloping land, small animals and agro-forestry land technologies.

The Vietnamese studied these techniques, as well as Watson's UPLIFT, or Using Properly Integrated Lowland Farming Technology, and FAITH, or Food Always In The Home, programs, which incorporate soil conservation and food production on small parcels of land.

They also met Philippine farmers, who face problems similar to those in Vietnam. The Filipinos -- poor farmers like the Vietnamese -- showed the delegation how they have improved their living conditions using techniques taught at the Rural Life Center. "That made a significant impact on these Vietnamese farmers," said Raley. "It meant something to the Vietnamese to see how Philippine farmers did things and to see they have many of the same problems. Sometimes it helps to see that other people have difficulties, too."

Soil erosion, especially in the hilly country that makes up much of Vietnam, is a major problem. Bombing during the Vietnam War destroyed much of the nation's rain forest. Vietnamese cut away most of what was left and sold it for lumber. The timber was not replaced, adding to erosion, and over-cultivation depleted the soil of valuable nutrients.

"All this together means a declining income for the farmer and declining food supply for the population," explained Shelby. "Vietnam's agriculture situation is one of the worst in the world. ... The land is so worked out that it's not producing anymore."

Farmers from Vietnam's northern provinces are known as hard workers but still get substandard results. "Through their best efforts, most only make half the daily ration of rice the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization says is needed to sustain health," Raley said. "None of them attain the FAO's minimum requirements."

Although impressed with the agricultural training, the Vietnamese group "talked over and over about the harmony and teamwork and Christian love exhibited by the staff of the Rural Life Center," said Shelby. "The obvious witness of the staff had a major impact on them." None of the Vietnamese were Christians, he said, but some attended worship services at the center each Sunday during the visit. For several, it was the first time they had been in a Christian worship service.

The Rural Life Center combines practical training with Christian ministry. Every aspect of the center's work includes personal evangelism. Organizers said the Vietnamese responded to the Christian emphasis with respect and appreciation. They particularly were impressed that the center is funded by Christians in the United States and not by the U.S. government.

The center's staff "realized these people have no access to the gospel, and they presented it with great sensitivity," Raley said. "The Vietnamese thought it was astounding that people in the U.S. give money to make it possible to help their people. For many of (the Vietnamese) all they know of America was what they had seen from the open bomb bay of a B-52."

On the final day of the workshop, the Vietnamese presented plans for using the training back home. They suggested more Vietnamese officials visit the center to help secure government backing for efforts to put the technology into practice in Vietnam.

During closing ceremonies, the group planted an evergreen tree to symbolize the friendship between the center's staff and the Vietnamese. Each participant received a certificate and bag of seeds to take back to Vietnam.

Farmers in Vietnam are planting crops now. Center Director Watson plans a trip there during harvest to check on their progress. Watson's discussions "will not go on in government halls but in farmers' homes," Raley said.

"A great deal of reconciliation is going on between us and them," Raley added. "This is the beginning not only of many other delegations of this type but of a friendship that will be able to deepen during the coming years. ... When these sorts of things happen, the world tilts a little bit on its axis towards peace and towards healing from terrible wounds."