

Couple Belonged to Cuba Spy Ring, FBI Says

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A husband and wife who lived in Miami for about eight years were arrested in Orlando on Friday and charged with being part of a now-dismantled Cuban spy ring - the latest salvo against Fidel Castro's foreign espionage apparatus on U.S. soil.

A federal indictment accuses George Gari, 41, and Marisol Gari, 42, of being agents for the Cuban Directorate of Intelligence who assisted in two primary goals: trying to infiltrate West Miami-Dade's Southern Command headquarters and to penetrate the inner circles of the Cuban American National Foundation, a prominent Cuban exile group.

The couple allegedly belonged to Cuba's La Red Avispa, or Wasp Network, which the FBI busted in September 1998. Five high-ranking intelligence agents from the group were convicted on federal spying-related charges in June. Those men are awaiting sentencing.

The investigation of the spy ring may lead to even more arrests, law enforcement officials said.

"We have indicated this investigation is ongoing, and we're going to follow every single lead we can and bring to justice every single person we can based on the evidence and the law," U.S. Attorney Guy Lewis said.

Héctor Pesquera, special agent in charge of the FBI in Miami, said the case was not brought sooner because the Garis were not as high a priority as the earlier defendants and there was little chance of their leaving the country.

But neither was the couple at the bottom of the ring's hierarchy. Assistant U.S. Attorney David Buckner, who will prosecute the case, said George Gari was a "midlevel agent" with management power over other agents.

Defense attorneys for the convicted spies said Friday they were not impressed with the government's latest effort. They said some information in the new indictment was disclosed to them more than two years ago for their trial, which also focused on spy attempts to infiltrate the Southern Command and Cuban exile groups.

"This is a dinky little indictment, said Paul McKenna, lawyer for Gerardo Hernández, a ringleader.

"It sounds like more of the same: people who talked about infiltrating military installations but who never did it, and who, in fact, focused on exile groups," said William Norris, lawyer for Ramón Labañino.

Officials said George Gari was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., but moved with his family to Cuba as a child. His wife was born in Cuba. The pair received several years of training in weapons, explosives, encryption and surveillance techniques before moving to the Miami area about 10 years ago, officials said.

George Gari, Miami-Dade records show, was a registered Republican.

The couple moved to Orlando within the last 18 months. They have an older daughter and two school-age children who apparently were taken in by relatives following the arrests, officials said.

The former manager of the Hialeah apartment building where the couple first lived said George Gari moved into the building because his late grandmother, Gloria Rodriguez, had lived there for many years.

Gari was a supervisor at a window and door company.

The former manager, Alberto, who asked that his last name not be used, said he and his wife baby-sat for the couple. The Garis never discussed politics, he said, and blended in with other families.

The Garis brought their children by to visit about a year ago and said their oldest daughter was in the Army, said Alberto

"I feel really bad; I didn't expect this," his wife Antonia said. ``It's like they were family."

In May 1995, the indictment states, the couple checked out security measures at the Cuban American National Foundation headquarters.

Among the couple's specific targets, Lewis said: Roberto Martín Pérez, a former Cuban political prisoner and Foundation director who is married to radio commentator Ninoska Pérez, former spokeswoman for the Foundation.

Lewis said the agents sought to build a store of information on Martín Pérez similar to that the network gathered on other community and political figures.

"They want to know what kind of car you're driving. Where do you go? Where do you eat? Who do you associate with? What are your phone numbers? This is the kind of information they would seek to obtain and exploit," he said.

Martín Pérez was out of town Friday. Ninoska Pérez said neither she nor her husband had ever heard of the Gari family but said that if they saw pictures, they might recognize them.

"This does not surprise me," she said. ``We always said the Wasp Network had many more members than those initially detained."

"Lewis said Marisol Gari used her job at the U.S. Postal Service's Miami International Airport distribution center to try to gain access to Foundation-related mail.

"More recently, George Gari worked at Lockheed-Martin in Orlando as a machine tester from January to March of this year.

"He was fired after the FBI told Lockheed he was under investigation, Pesquera said, though Gari was not believed to pose a security risk at work.

According to the indictment, the Garis managed another agent named Gabriel in his bid to get a job at the Southern Command, which oversees American military operations in the Caribbean and Latin America.

The indictment charges the Garis - who went by the code names Luis and Margot - of being unregistered foreign agents as part of a conspiracy from 1991 to 1998.

The couple would travel to New York, where they'd pass information to Cuban spy leaders and pick up money, Lewis said.

On Friday, the Garis made their initial appearance before U.S. Magistrate James G. Glazebrook in Orlando. Both were expressionless as the judge appointed lawyers to represent them. Another hearing is scheduled for Tuesday in Orlando.

In court, assistant U.S. attorney Greg Miller said George Gari had tried to get a job at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa.

Neighbors at the Doral Springs apartments, where the couple moved from Hialeah, said their children were named Georgie and Marisol, after their parents. One neighbor said an older girl who she believed to be another daughter also lived with them. Public records indicate a Surama Gari, now 20, lived there in 1998.

In Orlando, Marisol Gari was working as a cashier at a gas station, according to a teenager who said she was George Gari's niece. The girl would not give her name.

Last November, the Garis moved to an apartment near Universal Studios, the niece said. Little Georgie recently began playing Little League baseball, she said.

"They're very honest, very hardworking people," the niece said. "Their life revolved around the family and, you know, trying to pay the bills."

=Staff writers Alfonso Chardy and Andres Viglucci contributed to this report.

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