

Messages May Have Warned Of Shoot-Down FBI Intercept Of Cuban Radio Calls Weren't Sent On, Clinton Advisor Says

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The FBI intercepted clandestine communications between Havana and its South Florida intelligence agents that forecast a potentially potentially violent confrontation between Cuba and Brothers to the Rescue more than a week before the Feb. 24, 1996, shoot-down that killed four men, newly released documents from the Cuban spy trial show.

But the FBI apparently did not share its knowledge - significantly more foreboding and specific than was publicly known before now - with the White House's top advisors on Cuba, those advisors said Friday.

``I'm flabbergasted, furious and not at all surprised," Richard Nuccio, President Bill Clinton's Cuba advisor at the time, told The Herald. ``This is the first I've known that these intercepts were going on. I never recall getting any information through FBI channels about Brothers to the Rescue."

Had Nuccio known the nature of Havana's messages, he said, ``it would have made my case stronger" to keep Brothers leader Jose Basulto out of the air that fateful day - effectively canceling the flights and perhaps avoiding the shoot-down.

There is no question that U.S. officials had warnings that Cuba might attack the Brothers' aircraft. But Nuccio and others have maintained that while they had concerns, they had no hard information suggesting a shootdown would occur - especially over international waters. Previously published reports never included evidence as specific as the FBI's intercepted messages.

RADIO BROADCASTS

At issue is a newly declassified series of transcripts of shortwave radio broadcasts routinely intercepted by the FBI in late 1995 and early 1996. In them, Havana intelligence bosses expressed to their Miami-based agents increasing frustration with Basulto, who was flying over Cuba dropping anti-Castro leaflets.

By Jan. 29, the ``high command" in Cuba had approved ``Operation Scorpion, so as to perfect challenges to counter-revolutionary actions by Brothers to the Rescue," said a radio message on that date.

Operation Scorpion took shape over the next two weeks, the decoded messages indicate.

Between Feb. 14 and Feb. 24, the shoot-down day, Havana repeatedly warned its Miami-based agents who had infiltrated Brothers to the Rescue not to fly on Brothers planes between Feb. 24 and Feb. 27.

Nuccio said no one ever told him of those warnings. In fact, he says, the FBI never told him that it knew Cuba had infiltrated Brothers to the Rescue.

One message stands out. It allegedly was written by Eduardo Delgado Rodriguez, code named ``MX," a Cuban general who has headed the Interior Ministry's Directorate of Intelligence (DI), Cuban's main foreign espionage agency.

According to prosecutors, the message was directed to double agents Juan Pablo Roque, code named ``German," and Rene Gonzalez, code named ``Castor."

Gonzalez is one of five spy suspects on trial in federal court.

It states: ``MX instructs that under no circumstances should German nor Castor fly with Brothers to the Rescue or another organization on days 24, 25, 26 and 27, coinciding with celebration of Concilio Cubano [a planned national conference of dissident groups in Havana], in order to avoid any incident of provocation that they may carry out and our response to it."

Nuccio said no one ever told him of that message, which he called ``significant" because it appears to foreshadow a violent response - one that necessitated keeping Cuban agents off the planes.

``No one had ever told me, `We have these intercepts going on and here's what these guys were planning and clearly they are double agents.' These are all things that would have been crucial to me in my job that the FBI chose not to pass along," he said.

``Unless they told me, they weren't telling the person who was in the best position to judge the significance of that information."

Jill Stillman, spokeswoman for the FBI in Washington, declined to comment.

``We do not comment on ongoing investigations, including trials," she said. ``We will not comment on whether we spoke to someone from the White House."

FBI INFORMATION

It was unclear whether the FBI shared its intelligence information with Nuccio's boss, Sandy Berger, who at the time was the No. 2 person at the security council. Berger today is Clinton's national security advisor.

``Certainly the White House had no specific information that we were expecting an attack on the Brothers to the Rescue that day, but I can't speak for the FBI," said P.J. Crowley, the White House's National Security Council spokesman.

Basulto declined to comment Friday. He said he was following a gag order on trial witnesses. But Basulto's lawyer, Sofia Powell-Cosio, reiterated his stance: that the White House knew about the shoot-down in advance.

Nuccio, now director of the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I., was so worried about a confrontation between Havana and Brothers that on Feb. 23, 1996, he wrote an e-mail to Berger warning of a possible shoot-down.

Nuccio said he included the shoot-down scenario to get Berger's attention, but even

he never believed a shutdown was imminent unless the Brothers overflew Cuba. He was worried, he said, because he had unsuccessfully tried to get the Federal Aviation Administration to stop Basulto from flying.

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