

Alleged Cuban spies did little damage, Pentagon says

**By Manny Garcia, Carol Rosenberg and Cynthia Corzo
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The 10 suspected Cuban spies did not steal any critical U.S. military secrets, federal authorities said Tuesday, but the FBI arrested them last weekend because agents feared the group would flee the country following the theft of a computer allegedly used in espionage.

"They did not succeed in breaking into the bases as I understand it," Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon told The Herald. "One of them worked in a military base, obviously. But there are no indications that they had access to classified information or access to sensitive areas."

This morning, eight of the defendants are scheduled to appear for a bond hearing in federal court in Miami. Two others are scheduled for court Thursday.

The goal now for prosecutors is to persuade the alleged agents to cooperate, two sources familiar with the case said. Investigators want to know how involved Cuban government officials were. Investigators also hope to determine whether the alleged spies participated in the downing of two Brothers to the Rescue planes by Cuban MiGs in February 1996.

The arrests also revealed some disturbing questions — like how much of a spy ring it really was. Manuel Viramontes, the alleged ringleader who used an alias, sometimes missed his rent payments. Another alleged spy worked two unrelated jobs to make ends meet. Some of their scanners, radios and laptop computers were old.

The FBI in Miami said Tuesday that the alleged spy ring failed to penetrate military bases during its two years under federal surveillance. "They had no successes," FBI spokesman Mike Fabregas said.

But in Washington, senior FBI investigators called the group "an extremely sophisticated ring" and, on a scale of 1 to 10, rated the ring an 8.5. The FBI told staffers that some parts of the operation were basic, but other operations — technology and encryption — were sophisticated.

On Monday, federal prosecutors charged the 10 South Floridians, alleging the organization sought to infiltrate U.S. military bases in South Florida and sow discord among exile groups in Miami.

Those arrested are: Viramontes, Luis Medina, Rene Gonzalez-Sehweret, Antonio Guerrero Jr., Ruben Campa, Alejandro Alonso, Nilo Hernandez-Mederos, Linda Hernandez, Joseph Santos and Amarylis Silverio.

A complaint to Havana

State Department spokesman James P. Rubin issued a tough complaint to Havana at his daily briefing in Washington.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms the Cuban government's attempts to exploit the very openness of our society, while continuing to deny the Cuban people fundamental freedoms and human rights," Rubin said. "The great irony here is that here is the Cuban

government trying to exploit our openness while denying their very people any modicum of democracy for so long.”

Calls to the Cuban Interests Section in Washington were not returned.

In Miami, the arrests brought cheers in the Cuban exile community. Many exiles said the government was aiming at the right target. Earlier this month, scores of exiles complained that federal prosecutors focused on members of the Cuban American National Foundation in an alleged plot to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Rubin sought to dispel any notion that the arrests of the Cubans was an attempt to appease the exile community.

“There have been some suggestions that, you know, there are some quid pro quos going on, or many different conspiracy theories generated by some, and let me say this: There is no basis to any such allegation,” Rubin said.

Reaction to arrests

On Tuesday, reaction to the arrests generally played well from the Spanish-language radio stations in Miami to Congress and the White House.

Said White House spokesman Mike McCurry: “It doesn't change our view that, as the lone communist holdout in this hemisphere, they pose a threat to the values and to the ideals that we in this democracy hold very dear.”

Also Tuesday, Bill Doherty, the FBI's chief for counterintelligence, gave congressional staffers a synopsis of the case.

The FBI said Medina recently had his computer equipment and diskettes stolen and agents feared the group would flee and all would be lost.

At one point, the FBI considered arresting only group members who were attempting to penetrate exile groups while continuing to watch those spies involved in military intelligence gathering. The FBI hoped to gather more evidence but quashed the idea after the computer theft.

Praise and criticism

In Miami, Jose Basulto, founder of Brothers to the Rescue, called a press conference at La Ermita de la Caridad, the most sacred exile gathering place. He initially praised the FBI for making the arrests, but then criticized federal investigators for waiting so long to make the arrests -- or not tipping the Brothers off that they had an alleged spy among them.

Basulto said the arrests confirmed that Gonzalez-Sehweret participated in the downing of the Brothers' planes. Basulto said Gonzalez-Sehweret was a close friend of Juan Pablo Roque, a former Brothers pilot who defected to the United States then returned to Cuba shortly before the shooting.

The U.S. attorney's office declined to respond to Basulto's comments or to answer any questions about the timing of the arrests. But law enforcement authorities pointed out that they did not know about the infiltration of Brothers to the Rescue until six months after the February 1996 shoot-down.

They noted that according to the complaint they filed Monday against the alleged spies, the FBI did not obtain access to information that appeared on seized computer diskettes until August 1996. Those diskettes showed that one of the defendants, Gonzalez-Sehweret, had been directed by the Cuban government to infiltrate and report on the Brothers, the Democracy Movement and four other exile organizations.

Seeking cooperation

The government apparently is trying to persuade the alleged spies to cooperate with investigators.

Miami lawyer Richard Diaz, who, with an associate, Vincent Farina, represents Nilo and Linda Hernandez, said agents invited his clients' cooperation after they were arrested Saturday.

"I met with my clients today and the other day, and they did tell me that at the time of their arrest that the agents put a lot of pressure on them, tried to get them to make post-arrest confessions and tried to get them to cooperate," Diaz said.

"I'm certain in this case they will try to flip one, if not more," he added.

Diaz said neither Hernandez is prepared to cooperate. He said both deny the charges against them and he believes there is a compelling case for their release on bail.

"They have no criminal history," Diaz said. "It will be very interesting to find out what information the government alleges these two people provided that went to the Cuban government."

Herald staff writer David Lyons contributed to this report.

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