

U.S. urges clampdown on Cuban exile's terrorist actions

By Juan O. Tamayo and Glenn Garvin

Herald Staff Writers

Published Wednesday, September 30, 1998, in the Miami Herald

U.S. diplomats and CIA officials in Central America have been ordered by Washington to prod their host governments to clamp down on a Cuban exile accused of terror attacks on Havana, U.S. officials say.

Reinforcing Washington's message, the U.S. officials said, two FBI agents visited Guatemala last month to look into reports that the exile, Luis Posada Carriles, had tried to smuggle bombs from there to Havana.

The message was delivered to Central American governments just days before U.S. prosecutors in Puerto Rico charged seven Cuban exiles with plotting to assassinate President Fidel Castro, although U.S. officials insist the two events do not represent any change in policy.

Washington has always opposed violent attacks on Cuba, the officials added, and is now again making its views known to Central American governments because of the many recent reports on Posada's anti-Castro plots.

Posada has lived almost openly in Central America for 13 years, and even worked for former presidents of El Salvador and Guatemala, even though he is a fugitive wanted in the midair bombing of a jetliner that killed 73 people. He recently admitted organizing a string of bombings in Havana last year.

U.S. officials said the American embassies in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were directed by Washington in a mid-August cable to deliver to their host governments a three-point message on Posada:

- * He is not a U.S. protégé, despite his work for the CIA in the 1960s and '70s and for Oliver North's campaign to supply CIA-backed Nicaraguan contra rebels from El Salvador from 1986 to 1988.

- * Washington expects local officials to investigate Posada's many reported anti-Castro attacks and plots, and prosecute him if possible.

- * Washington wants any information that local intelligence officials may have on Posada.

U.S. message

"Our message is that we're not behind Posada, that we're concerned about his activities and we want them stopped," said a U.S. official with access to the Washington cable.

A Washington official authorized to speak on the issue said the government never comments on diplomatic cables, but added the following statement:

"These Central American countries are aware of the strong U.S. position opposing the perpetration of terrorist acts against Cuba. ... We would expect [them] to take law enforcement actions against persons or groups carrying out such acts from their territory," the official said.

Security officials in Honduras and El Salvador confirmed that U.S. diplomats and CIA staffers assigned to the local embassies began passing on strong warnings about Posada around the middle of August.

"It was a clear and tough message," said one security official in Honduras.

Posada, now about 69 years old, has long been one of the Cuban exiles most active in violent attacks against the Castro government.

He escaped from a Venezuelan jail in 1985 while awaiting trial in the 1976 bombing of a Cuban jetliner and settled in El Salvador, though he has also lived in Guatemala and Honduras.

In two recent media interviews, Posada acknowledged he had hired a Salvadoran man, Raul Ernesto Cruz Leon, who was arrested in Cuba last year and charged with a half-dozen bombings of tourism centers around Havana.

Recent Herald reports have linked him to attempts to hire Guatemalans to deliver bombs to Cuba last year, and to kill Castro in Colombia in 1994 and the Dominican Republic last month.

Few if any problems

Yet, despite the charges and allegations against him, Posada appears to have had few if any problems with local security officials throughout his stay in Central America.

Posada has often claimed to have friends in the FBI and CIA, as well as the Cuban American National Foundation, among Cuban Americans in the U.S. military and exiles living in the United States and Central America.

He is also known to be well connected to conservative Central American military officers, politicians and businessmen who share his deeply anti-communist views and see Castro as a foe of their own nations.

Police in El Salvador, where he lives most of the time, apparently have made no attempt to question Posada since Cruz Leon was arrested in Havana for the terror bombings that killed one Italian tourist and wounded six people.

Posada worked as a security advisor for the late Salvadoran President Jose Napoleon Duarte around 1988, and is known to be close friends with active and retired military officers and some of the country's richest businessmen.

Guatemalan security officials also appear to have done little after receiving a report from an informant last fall alleging that Posada was recruiting Guatemalans to deliver bombs to Havana while posing as tourists.

Assassination attempt

Posada worked as a security advisor to former Guatemalan President Vinicio Cerezo in 1989 and 1990, when he barely survived an assassination attempt by gunmen who pumped about a dozen bullets into his body.

"We do believe that some local officials were basically clueless on Posada," said a U.S. official in Central America. ``But there's no question that others knew where he was and what he was up to."

U.S. officials knowledgeable about the U.S. message on Posada said it was being relayed mostly by State Department diplomats, though CIA personnel in the region were relaying it to their local counterparts.

Officials in Washington said another sign of the U.S. interest in Posada was the recent visit to Guatemala by two FBI agents from Puerto Rico, where seven exiles have been charged with plotting to kill Castro.

It is not clear what links there are, if any, between the Puerto Rico case and Guatemala, where an informant told local security officials last September that Posada was trying to smuggle explosives from there to Cuba.

Posada has told several exile friends in Miami that he was not involved in the Puerto Rico plot and regarded the alleged plan to assassinate Castro in Venezuela last November as extremely foolish.

Copyright © 1998 The Miami Herald