

U.S. Braces For Retaliation Over Cuba 'Spy' Expulsion

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Author: JUAN O. TAMAYO, Herald Staff Writer

U.S. officials said Wednesday they hope the expulsion of three Cuban diplomats at the United Nations linked to a Miami spy ring will not affect U.S. relations with Havana but they girded for retaliatory expulsions by Cuba.

The three Cubans in New York have until 5 p.m. Monday to leave the country, according to a State Department statement. It also noted that two other Cuban diplomats accused of being spies had previously returned to Havana.

The top Cuban expelled was Eduardo Martinez Borbonet, the mission's first secretary, who acted as liaison with the U.N. Development Program and UNICEF.

The other two were Third Secretary Roberto Azanza Perez and Attache Gonzalo Fernandez Garay, described by U.N. diplomats as "electronic repair types." All have diplomatic immunity and cannot be arrested.

The five Cuban diplomats were "definitely linked to the group in Miami," a top State Department official said, referring to the 10 Cubans arrested in Miami in September on charges of spying for Havana.

U.S. diplomats in New York said they knew of no violations of the travel restrictions imposed on all Cuban diplomats there - no trips more than 25 miles from central Manhattan without notifying U.S. officials - indicating that at least some of the Miami suspects traveled to New York.

The State Department announcement said only that the expulsions had been decided on "as a result of evidence developed during an exhaustive investigation by the FBI."

White House spokesman P.J. Crowley said later that the three had engaged "in activities incompatible with their diplomatic status," a euphemism for espionage.

U.S. officials said the Cuban mission in New York was informed of the expulsions Monday afternoon and was given 24 hours to respond. The Cubans did not reply, and were given the Monday deadline at a second meeting Wednesday.

One of the five Cubans linked to the spy network had returned to Havana four or five weeks ago at the end of his regular tour of duty and another went back about the same time on what began as a routine trip, a knowledgeable U.S. official said.

Washington, meanwhile, braced for Cuban retaliatory expulsions of U.S. diplomats in Havana.

"Expect would be too strong a word, but [President Fidel] Castro is capable of surprises," said one State Department specialist on Cuba.

"This is a New York thing and not a Washington thing," said another, arguing that the espionage dispute should not affect the diplomatic missions that Cuba and the

United States maintain in each other's capitals.

``Retaliating against our people in Havana is not an option. If that happened we could be forced to reply, against the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, a State Department official said.

U.S. officials met Tuesday in Washington with the head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, Fernando Ramirez, to give him details of the expulsions, according to State Department sources.

Evidence of crackdown

Cuban exiles welcomed the expulsions as a sign that Washington is continuing a crackdown on Havana spies that began with the arrest of 10 Miami-area Cubans accused of snooping on U.S. military facilities and exiles in Florida.

``We are encouraged that we are beginning to see the results of these investigations, and we hope they provide more results soon, said Jose Basulto, head of Brothers to the Rescue.

Florida Republican Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart said he would ask the FBI for a briefing on the expulsions when he returns to Washington after the year-end holidays.

``Until then, everything is speculation, he said.

U.S. officials have expelled at least nine Cubans from the U.N. mission since 1983, the last three after they scuffled in 1995 with Cuban exile protesters and New York police outside the Cuban Mission in Manhattan.

Large presence in NYC

Cuba maintains a large mission at the United Nations, with 40 accredited diplomats and an estimated 20 to 30 support personnel, compared to Australia's 12-member mission and Argentina's 20.

Havana has long used its U.N. mission as its leading intelligence-gathering facility in the United States because it was its only foothold on U.S. territory until it opened the Interests Sections in Washington in 1977, U.S. sources say.

All but one of the ``diplomats assigned to the Interests Section that year were intelligence officers, said one expert, but they drew such intense U.S. scrutiny that Havana eventually decided to keep its spy base in New York.

``You don't need intelligence people to gather information or lobby the Hill, said one retired CIA official.

Expulsion meant to be quiet

State Department officials said that to avoid a public scandal, the latest Cuban expulsions were supposed to have been kept secret until after the three diplomats had left the country next week.

``Our preference was to keep it quiet, to keep it low key and avoid a publicity

explosion, but someone somewhere began leaking yesterday, one official said.

Veterans of Cuba-U.S. spy games said U.S. officials usually go out of their way to publicize the expulsion of Cuban spies because, as one put it, ``their activities are a little more onerous.

While the United States often keeps quiet the expulsion of diplomats from less antagonistic countries, said Skip Brandon, retired FBI deputy assistant director on terrorism, ``usually we slam-dunk the Cubans.

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Herald special correspondent Stewart Stogel contributed to this report.

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