

Cuba's Espionage Network Falls, 10 Arrested in Miami

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In an action without precedent over the four decades of the Castro regime, the Federal Bureau of Investigations accused a group of 10 Cubans in Federal Court in Miami of working as agents for the Cuban government, and of having as their objective the obtaining of reports on military installations and exile groups in south Florida.

According to the report presented to Judge Barry L. Garber by FBI Special Agent Raúl Fernández, the majority of the accused are officers in the Cuban government's intelligence services, who lived in the United States with false identities and controlled other agents recruited for espionage work, infiltration of exile organizations, as well as manipulating the media, political organizations and public opinion.

The accused face charges of "conspiracy and fraud against the government," violation of the law which requires "agents of an enemy country" to register themselves, and the most serious of all, that which might carry a life sentence without possibility of parole, "sending of information related to defense matters, to a foreign government," that is, espionage.

In the first hearing of the case, Judge Garber decided to appoint public defenders for at least eight of the accused, who argued that they had no [financial] means to defend themselves. Only Nilo and Linda Hernández named their own defender, Rick Díaz.

The case, given the number 98-3493, and whose indictment consists of 27 pages, divided into 49 chapters, is a milestone in the covert intelligence war maintained between the two countries over four decades.

"This spy network was sent by the Cuban government to strike at the very heart of our system of national security and our democratic process," said the federal prosecutor, Thomas Scott.

The prosecution, represented by the First Assistants of the Federal Prosecutor in Florida, Guy Luis and Caroline Heck-Miller, also asked the judge not to grant bail, but Garber scheduled various separate hearings for the coming week, to decide the matter.

"Your Honor, we believe that there are sound reasons to deny bail to all of them, because they might escape from the country," said Heck-Miller.

The accused, eight men and two women, appeared handcuffed in court shortly after 2:30 p.m., amid a swarm of reporters and family members who had some difficulty fitting themselves into the narrow hearing room.

Among the public were well-known Cuban exile activists, such as Silvia Orondo, of the MAR organization, and José Basulto, President of Brothers to the Rescue.

The hearing lasted about half an hour, and the accused presented themselves dressed in light blue short-sleeved shirts, dark blue pants, green socks and brown sandals. They remained quiet the entire time, with a serious demeanor, and responded slowly to

questions from the judge through which they were identified and reported their addresses, bank accounts and professions.

Upon leaving, the attorneys refused comment on the case, arguing the need to study it. However, Díaz told the press that he was under the impression that the prosecution has not provided all the evidence in this case.

"I can't be sure, but from the way that the indictment was presented, the FBI should make available the confidential information in this case," said the attorney for the Hernández couple.

In the indictment, two other names appear: Ricardo Villareal, alias Horacio, and Remijio Lunas, alias Marcellino, but only to state that they were not captured, due to having been outside the United States at the time of the arrests.

Later, in a press conference in the headquarters of the office of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) in Miami, its director, Héctor Pesquera refused comment on the matter.

"This is the largest operation of this kind that we've undertaken in south Florida. Normally one enemy officer is captured, in this case we captured three and seven of their agents. Cuban intelligence should be on the run," said Pesquera.

According to the FBI official, the investigations began in 1994, involving an "important" number of FBI officials, which was not specified, and the congressional representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Lincoln Diaz-Balart were informed early Saturday morning of the arrests.

Among the evidence presented by the FBI to the press were three laptop computers, portable shortwave radios, transmitters and shortwave scanners, as well as various antennas, both for internal and external uses, and for automobile use.

The documentation also included various applications for work at places related to the country's defense system, as well as a death certificate for a child who died in California in 1969 just five days after being born, and which was supposedly ready to be utilized as a cover identity for a future agent, explained an FBI official.

To all this was added scores of computer diskettes where the FBI found the contact registry for the Cuban intelligence services, copies of orders received from the "main center," supposedly in Cuba, receipts and payment records for agents and for operational expenses, as well as copies of orders and instructions received by the spy network.

"The evidence is so overwhelming," added Scott, that "we haven't been able to display everything here this afternoon."

Meanwhile, in Havana, the spokesman for the Cuban Foreign Ministry, Alejandro González, asked for comment on the arrests, did not elaborate much on the issue and limited himself to confirming that he was aware of the case.

"We only know what has been reported via the wire services. This is a matter in which the U.S. authorities are involved, and it is not responsible to make a declaration on a matter we do not know about," said González.

In a report distributed to the press by the FBI, it states that "through its main agents, or illegal officers, the group communicated directly with the Cuban government about its activities, received specific missions and assignments from the Cuban government."

The accused were identified as Manuel Viramontes, who apparently acted as the head of the network, Luis Medina, René González-Sehweret, Antonio Guerrero, Ruben Campa, Alejandro Alonso, the married couple Nilo and Linda Hernández, Joseph Santos and Amarilys Silverio.

All of them were arrested at their respective domiciles in an operation carried out by the FBI in the early morning hours of Saturday, September 12.

"Since 1995, the FBI has watched and directly observed the movements, communications and residences of one or more of the individuals named here," said the report.

The FBI's accusation about this alleged spy network organized by the Cuban government, against military and political objectives in the United States, comes at a time when the same institution has indicted a group of Cuban exiles in Puerto Rico under charges of conspiring in an assassination attempt against the Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

According to the FBI investigations, the leaders of the group, at the moment of their arrest, on September 12, 1998, were Viramontes, alias Giro or Giraldo; Campa, alias Vicky, and Luis Medina, alias Allan.

Viramontes fundamentally led the entire operation and supervised the infiltration of other agents into exile groups in Miami; Medina had as his responsibility to penetrate and report on military installations in South Florida, including the Southern Command and the Naval Airbase at Boca Chica.

The indictment refers to the arrested as "agents of a foreign government," who "operated within the United States subject to the direction or control of a foreign government or official," according to the report.

According to the FBI, following instructions from the Cuban government, the group sought intelligence reports related, among other things, to the humanitarian and domestic political activities of anti-Castro organizations in Miami-Dade county; the operation of U.S. military installations and other functions of the federal government.

Color photo: Alejandro Alonso, Ruben Campa, Rene González-Schweret, Antonio Guerrero, Linda and Lino Hernández, Joseph Santos, Manuel Viramontes, Luis Medina, Amarilys Silverio (a), Thomas Scott (n)

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