

Cuban Fighter Jets' Alleged Proximity to U.S. While Pursuing Small Aircraft is Worrisome

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The affirmation that Cuban combat planes the Cessna piloted by Brothers to the Rescue president José Basulto to near Key West last February 24, has given rise to new questions about the incident in which four pilots of that organization were downed by Cuban fighter jets.

"It is alarming to know that the Castro air force could have come so close, to within a few miles of United States waters to murder an American citizen without being confronted by the armed forces of the United States," declared Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican congressperson for Florida.

Ros-Lehtinen directed important letters Tuesday to Secretary of Defense William Perry, and to Central Intelligence Agency Director John Deutch, asking for an investigation to determine if the Cuban air force violated United States airspace and what would be the response of the United States if this type of incident occurred in the future.

Some details of the pursuit by Cuban fighter jets of a Cessna 337 small aircraft, that lasted 20 minutes, became known on Monday during the judicial hearing which occurred in the federal court of Miami, where Basulto is appealing the revocation of his pilot's license by the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA).

Transcripts of the communications recorded by the U.S. intelligence services, between the military control tower and Cuban fighter jets, obtained by El Nuevo Herald, reveal that the Cuban fighter jets were pursuing a Cessna 337 until 3:52 p.m., in other words, 31 minutes after the first small aircraft was downed in international waters by a Cuban MIG.

The recording, nevertheless, does not resolve if the small aircraft being pursued, which the pilots of the Cuban fighter jets identified visually as a Cessna 337 of the colors light blue and white, was the same aircraft piloted by Basulto. The pilots could not verify its registration number, according to what the transcripts revealed.

The report of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), which investigated the incident, refers to the recording of the communications of the Cuban fighter jets, indicating that they reported having located a Cessna 337 that flew under them at an altitude of approximately 2,000 meters.

This happened at 3:51 p.m., the moment when the mission was cancelled, because according to the Cuban authorities cited in the report "the contact had been made now outside of the limits of Cuban airspace."

Nevertheless, the ICAO did not conclude that the Cessna 337 pursued by the Cuban MiGs was that of Basulto. According to the ICAO report, the radar images presented by the United States show at that time the trajectory of the Cessna piloted by Basulto some 40 nautical miles to the northeast of the activity carried out by the Cuban MiGs.

The radar images taken at that hour do not show any pursuit, a difference from that which is heard in the recordings. The Cuban fighter jets do not appear pursuing any small aircraft.

This apparent contradiction between the recording of the communications of the Cuban fighter jets and the United States radar images has remained unanswered to the present time.

Basulto says he has no doubts that it was about his own small aircraft Cessna 337, registration N2506.

"What other small aircraft of these characteristics was in the area at that hour?" wondered Basulto. "Moreover, the Cessna 337 is not a common aircraft and there are very few in south Florida."

If the suspicion of Basulto is correct, the Cuban fighter jets that pursued him would have come a short 20 miles from the coasts of Key West. In that case, North American F-15 combat planes should have been deployed from Homestead Airforce Base. According to the declaration at the time of Pentagon spokesperson Kenneth Bacon, at no time did the MIGs pass north of the 24th parallel, nor did they enter into the air defense zone of the United States.

Basulto said that his calculation is based on the fact that at 3:52 p.m., the hour that the Cuban fighter jets received orders to suspend their mission, he was some 24 miles to the north of the 24th parallel.

"My position is clearly set, precisely, in this radar photograph," said Basulto. "Why don't the MiGs appear there, that, according to the recording were already on top of us, that is a good question that the North American authorities have to answer."

This is the type of answer that congressperson Ros-Lehtinen is soliciting from the corresponding federal organizations.

"If these allegations are true, they demonstrate an apparent lack of preparation that should be changed immediately, because in the future the consequences could be devastating for the security of the region of south Florida," pointed out Ros-Lehtinen.

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