

In Memory of the Fallen

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By Wilfredo Cancio

On the third anniversary of the downing of two Brothers to the Rescue planes by Castro's air force, the Cuban community in Miami hosted a commemorative day of activities on Wednesday, which went into the evening with a Mass in honor of the four pilots killed.

For the Cubans in exile, February 24 is no longer just the date to commemorate the Grito de Baire, which marks the beginning of the last war of independence against Spanish colonialism in 1895. The patriotic celebration now coincides with the memory of the tragedy that occurred in the Straits of Florida in 1996.

The three Brothers to the Rescue planes took off at 1:33 pm from the Opa-locka airport in a symbolic flight to the Martyrs Point, where the pilots fell in international waters.

On board were members of Brothers and journalists. The expedition reached the site of the tragic attack, and after a few minutes of prayer and floral wreath offerings, they returned to Florida.

From the air José Basulto, president of Brothers, read a message to the Cuban people, which was broadcast live on Radio Martí.

"Today we ask of our brothers more than a tribute of a fleeting moment. We ask on their behalf the necessary national commitment made by every Cuban, to fulfill our destiny as a people," Basulto said in his address.

The participants in the mission also launched hundreds of flyers, addressed to the Cuban people, into the air. Some of them reached Cuban territory, according to a call received from the island by the Cuban American National Foundation.

Shortly before the departure the pilots of Brothers and a group of friends, remembered Armando Alejandro, Mario de la Peña, Carlos Costa and Pablo Morales with prayers, at the monument erected to their memory at the airport.

Eva Barba, the mother of Morales, arrived at the site early with a bouquet of flowers for her son. "It is a very painful day for me, but all I want is justice and truth in this case" Barba told El Nuevo Herald.

Minutes earlier, the family of Alejandro, De la Peña and Costa remained at the monument for a few minutes.

The families of Alejandro, De la Peña and Costa issued a press statement in which they affirmed that they are discouraged by the lack of support that the United States government has given them, and confirmed that the pursuit of justice is the purpose of all their actions.

"There are different paths to justice and we are entitled to receive it, but we are offended by the fact that Basulto has repeated that we want material benefits and not justice," emphasized Mayra Alejandro, sister of Armando Alejandro.

In the afternoon, hundreds of Cuban exiles participated in a caravan of cars and motorcycles that was convened by the anti-Castro coalition Cuban Unity.

Meanwhile, about 100 members of the Cuban American community in Washington were holding a vigil at the Cuba Interests Section in the city, at the close of this edition. The Republican Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen joined the participants in the event.

Caption: Color photo: Marlene Alejandre together with Maggie Khuly and Mirta Méndez, family members of the fallen pilots, during one of the commemorative acts.