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## President Bush Announces Measures Against Cuba

by LADB Staff

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President George W. Bush has been searching for ways to harden Cuba policy enough to satisfy suspicions in the Cuban- exile community that he has withdrawn from any serious attempt to overthrow President Fidel Castro. As the result of a recent policy review, Bush announced a set of measures that seem unlikely to have any effect on the Castro government and would mainly affect travelers going to Cuba without a Treasury Department license.

Disappointment with Bush's handling of the Cuba issue reached crisis proportions among Miami exiles in August when a group of Florida state legislators wrote to Bush expressing strong disagreement with the repatriation to Cuba of 12 alleged hijackers. Six of the 12 eventually received relatively light sentences after Castro promised not to apply the death sentence. Exile leaders in Miami were especially incensed that the US had negotiated the repatriation with Cuban authorities.

Worse, officials at the White House and the US Interests Section in Havana announced that the administration would adhere strictly to the 1994, 1995 migratory accords. That is anathema in right-wing circles because the accords require the US to repatriate Cubans picked up at sea. In their letter, the lawmakers warned Bush that the policy could cost him votes in the 2004 presidential election (see NotiCen, 2003-08-28). The first administration response was to reassure the legislators that Bush had done much to inflict damage on Castro and that he would soon make an important policy statement.

National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice wrote to the legislators in September listing Bush's accomplishments, but her effort did not assuage exile anger over the repatriations. Joe Garcia, executive director of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), said, "There's nothing there. There's more rhetoric."

*Roger Noriega, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, wrote to CANF president Jorge Mas Santos assuring him that Bush held fast to the policy of ending the Castro regime and that, in the meantime, the administration was analyzing the situation. Noriega's effort also failed to erase exile fears that Bush was going soft on communism. These administration reassurances came at a time when Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive war and regime change in the Middle East had led to widespread expectations that he was ready to launch some kind of military attack on Cuba. In this atmosphere, lists of actions taken against Castro some of*

*which occurred in the previous administration and promises of a policy review were insufficient.*

Sanctions ratcheted up

On Oct. 10, Bush gave a Rose Garden speech attended by anti-Castro conservatives in which he commemorated the start of the Cuban war for independence in 1868 and announced stepped up sanctions. He reminded the friendly audience that on May 20, 2002, he offered to ease the embargo and travel ban if Castro would hold elections and increase the level of capitalism (see NotiCen, 2002-05-23). The implication was that Castro had brought upon himself the following measures for having refused Bush's offer: - The Department of Homeland Security will step up inspections of travelers and shipments to Cuba.

By strangling illegal travel, Bush hopes to cut the flow of dollars to Cuba, which he says strengthens the regime, and reduce "the illicit sex trade, a modern form of slavery which is encouraged by the Cuban government." - The Interests Section is to increase the issuance of visas. The purpose here is to "ensure that Cubans fleeing the dictatorship do not risk their lives at sea." - Finally, the White House will set up a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, charged with hastening the transition to democracy and capitalism. The commission will consider such matters as providing for free enterprise, a modern infrastructure, and health, housing, and human services.

Co-chairing the commission will be Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Mel Martinez. Other than the crackdown on travel to Cuba, the Rose Garden speech added nothing concrete to the array of sanctions already in place. The idea of a commission to help the administration think of ways to bring Castro down raised the question, what could the commission suggest that the US government has not thought of in the past 44 years?

One of Bush's major justifications for these measures was the imprisonment in April of 75 dissidents and the execution of three hijackers in Cuba (see NotiCen, 2003-05-08). Since the trials revealed that these dissidents were in the employ of the US Interests Section, it would appear that Castro was to be punished for arresting what in the US would be considered unregistered foreign agents. Another justification was Castro's insistence that Cuba maintain its socialist economy. In a moment of exuberant hyperbole, Bush claimed, "Most goods and services produced in Cuba are still reserved for the political elites."

State Department briefing officer Richard Boucher was asked what Powell, as co-chair of the commission, would be doing that he does not already do. Ultimately, the role of the commission would be to bring a few more voices into the discussion, Boucher said. Asked if "hastening" Castro's downfall meant military intervention, Boucher said Bush was not considering it. Nevertheless, Raul Castro, head of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), pointedly said the Cuban military was ready.

The official government doctrine is to prepare for a popular resistance to US military intervention. Missing in the speech was any direct response to the central demand of the Florida legislators that

Bush cease all repatriations something the administration has explicitly refused to do. The shift away from lax enforcement of the migratory accords has been explained as necessary to protect US borders in the name of national security. Similarly, illegal travel to Cuba has now been redefined as a national-security issue by turning enforcement of the travel ban over to the Department of Homeland Security.

In his speech, Bush did not mention that the hard-line he proposed in retaliation for the April imprisonments and executions never materialized. Among the proposals the administration floated that were never enacted were blocking dollar remittances and canceling charter flights to Cuba (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05). Nor did he mention his offer to Castro--the ambitious Initiative for a New Cuba announced in last year's May 20 speech.

### *Speech meets with tepid response*

The Rose Garden offensive contained little to satisfy exile leaders, who remained skeptical that anything new would come out of the commission. Mas Santos limited himself to saying it was "a step in the right direction." The central contradiction in the promises regarding safe emigration from Cuba was that, over the years, the US policy of encouraging immigration taught the exile community to expect elastic rules on granting asylum. While improving the visa-approval process at the Interests Section could marginally increase safe and legal emigration to the US, Bush said nothing about changing the administration's new policy of repatriating immigrants picked up at sea and prosecuting hijackers.

Congressman Jeff Flake (R-AZ), who has argued for an end to the travel ban, said tightening it now was beating one's head against the wall. He and many opponents of the ban argue that a more open policy would help bring down the Castro regime faster than increased sanctions. The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry (MINREX) said Bush's new measures were aimed at "satisfying the criminal demands" of the extremist exile faction in Miami as a payback for their help in his 2000 election.

A Boston Herald editorial followed the same logic, calling the measures "an election-driven agenda that can most charitably be described as muddled." A number of other newspaper editorials also interpreted the Rose Garden speech as an electoral event aimed at mollifying the anti-Castro right. Notable in the audience were several prominent members of what the Cuban government calls "the Miami mafia." These included the three rightist members of Congress from Florida, and Ninosa Perez-Castellon who, along with others, bolted the CANF to organize the even more conservative Cuban Liberty Council (see NotiCen, 2001-10- 25).

In an analysis of the speech, the official Cuban government newspaper Granma characterized many of the invited guests as the offspring of lackeys who worked for the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. In Granma's view, the speech demonstrated that Bush chose to side with "the most radically fanatical camp linked to the dictatorship that Cuba rejected 40 years ago."

-- End --