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Venezuela-US Relations Hurt by Posada Case

by LADB Staff

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The Venezuelan government is demanding that the US government hand over accused bomber Luis Posada Carriles, apprehended May 17 by federal authorities in Southwest Miami-Dade, Florida. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has threatened to cut ties with the US government if it does not extradite the accused bomber, though US authorities say they have not yet received an extradition request on which they can act.

Posada, the anti-Castro militant and former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative from Cuba, who has alternately admitted and denied involvement in a bombing in Havana that killed three, said he sought to file an asylum request in the US.

Homeland Security captures Posada Carriles after two months

The US took Posada into "preventive detention" after he gave a clandestine press conference in a Miami warehouse on May 17. He was transported out of Florida and ultimately ended up in an immigration facility in El Paso, Texas. Posada, 77, was preparing to leave the country when he was arrested at the house where he had been staying, said Posada's lawyer, Eduardo Soto.

Posada had apparently been moving around the area with the help of a network of anti-Castro Miami residents. Posada told reporters that he entered the country through Mexico, although Cuban President Fidel Castro repeatedly claimed that Miami developer Santiago Alvarez, a friend and benefactor of Posada, brought him to Miami aboard his remodeled shrimp boat, Santrina, picking him up near Cancun in mid-March. Posada and three associates received a pardon from outgoing Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso (see NotiCen, 2004-09-23, 2004-09-16).

Mass marches in Cuba led by President Fidel Castro called for the accused bomber to be extradited from the US to face jail for his alleged crimes.

Press reports said hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Havana to call for Posada's arrest and extradition shortly before Homeland Security agents caught up with him. Once a supervisor for the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company's business operations in Cuba, Posada went on to take training from the CIA for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, though the boat he was on did not arrive before the operation had already failed. He worked for the US on various destabilization and anti-communist campaigns in countries including Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

The CIA claims to have had its final contact with Posada in the summer of 1976. In October of that year, a civilian Cuban airliner flying out of Caracas was dynamited above the Bahamas. In the explosion, 73 people died, including Cuba's teenaged fencing team and eleven Guyanese citizens, most of them students on their way to Havana to attend medical school.
Cuban and Venezuelan reports, along with declassified reports by US agencies, all said that Posada was involved in planning the attack, although Posada denies it. A Venezuelan court jailed Posada for his role in the 1976 bombing of the Cuban airliner. He escaped from jail disguised as a priest in 1985 while waiting for new charges to be filed against him following a prosecution appeal of two acquittals.

In 1998 interviews with New York Times reporter Ann Louise Bardach, Posada said he directed various bombing attacks against Cuba, including the 1997 bombings of Havana tourist hotels and restaurants (see EcoCentral, 1998-08-13). The death of an Italian tourist in one of those bombings has led the Italian government to look into whether it can extradite and prosecute Posada.

In an interview in The Miami Herald before he was arrested, Posada denied any involvement in the airliner bombing but refused to confirm or deny involvement in other attacks, telling the newspaper, "Let's leave it to history."

Cubans, Venezuelans, surviving family members angered

The father and brother of the Italian tourist killed by the bomb in a Havana hotel in 1997 say they are outraged that Posada is seeking asylum in the US. Livio Di Celmo, whose brother Fabio died in the hotel blast, says he is willing to travel to Miami to testify against Posada in any asylum or extradition proceeding. A US official familiar with the case, who requested anonymity, said the government has not ruled out calling to testify relatives of the victims or survivors from several attacks blamed on Posada.

Testimony in Immigration Court, where asylum proceedings often take place, does not have to meet the bar of conclusive direct evidence. Under US immigration law, a foreign national can be denied asylum if an immigration judge concludes that witness testimony shows there are "serious reasons for believing" that he committed "a serious nonpolitical crime." Livio Di Celmo and his father, Giustino Di Celmo, said they feel Posada should be detained and brought to justice.

"It's like a New York or New Jersey resident who lost a relative in the Sept. 11 attacks, and the mastermind of this terrorist act is living in Canada. Wouldn't they be upset at the Canadian government?" said Livio Di Celmo, in a phone interview from his Montreal home. Eight years ago, a bomb planted inside Havana's famed Copacabana Hotel exploded and shrapnel pierced 32-year-old Fabio Di Celmo's throat, killing him.

In 1997, Posada told The New York Times that he had masterminded the bombing campaign that targeted about a dozen sites in Havana that year. Posada later said he lied to the Times. He has never been prosecuted in Cuba or the US for the bombing. The Cuban government has said Posada would face a firing squad there.

Investigations against the Cuban exile were apparently underway in the US, though the US government has yet to level anything more serious than an illegal entry charge against him.
The Department of Homeland Security subpoenaed tapes of the interview Posada gave The New York Times in 1998. The newspaper's attorney, George Freeman, filed a motion in Miami Federal Court seeking to quash the subpoena. New torture allegations A former Venezuelan guerrilla has accused Posada of ordering his torture in 1973 while he was head of the Venezuela political police (Direccion de Servicios de Inteligencia Policial, DISIP).

The allegations from Jesus Marrero, the former Venezuelan guerrilla, could open a new front in the US government's case against Posada in immigration court. Posada told an interviewer that he had not ordered anyone's torture while he headed DISIP. Posada also denied ordering another guerrilla's murder. "When I got to DISIP, I abolished torture," Posada said. "I fired anyone who tortured."

Marrero, now an economist, said in a telephone interview from Venezuela that when he was in custody in 1973 he was interrogated by Posada. After he refused to reveal names of other members of Venezuela's leftist guerrilla movement, Posada ordered his torture. "Posada said to me, 'You will talk,'" Marrero said. "I know how you will talk." Marrero said he was then taken to an abandoned house on a hill overlooking Caracas and tortured by other DISIP police officers. He said he was placed on an iron drum-like contraption and tortured with electric shocks to his testicles and his right ear, and wooden sticks were rammed into his ears. Marrero said Posada never applied any torture himself.

Posada's lawyer, Eduardo Soto, declined to comment because he said he was not familiar with the charges. "If Luis says he has no involvement, then there is no involvement," Soto said.

In his May 11 interview with The Miami Herald, Posada denied knowing Marrero. However, in his 1994 autobiography, Los Caminos del Guerrero, Posada mentioned Marrero as one of several members of the guerrilla group Bandera Roja who were detained or killed or who disappeared during his tenure. In the book, Posada linked Bandera Roja and other guerrilla groups to kidnappings, assassinations, and attacks on police units in Caracas and other large Venezuelan cities. Posada said in the book that the groups were funded and trained by Cuba.

**Increased Venezuela-US antagonism over Posada**

The resurfacing of Posada is awkward for the US, which has been vocal regarding its so-called War on Terror. There is little political will in Washington to cooperate with the Chavez government, and Posada has a history of working with US intelligence operations in Latin America that could prove embarrassing to the government.

The Department of Homeland Security said that generally the US government does not return people to Cuba or to countries acting on Cuba's behalf, an apparent reference to the Chavez government. Venezuela recently approved an extradition request, and Castro has made numerous televised speeches calling Posada a terrorist and accusing the US of a double standard on terror. The US and Venezuela have an extradition treaty dating back to 1922.
"The majority of Americans would never be in favor of harboring a terrorist," said Wayne Smith, a former US envoy to Cuba who now heads the Cuba program at the Washington-based Center for International Policy (CIP). If the US were to grant asylum, Smith added, "we will be seen as hypocrites and as being against terrorism only when is suits our purposes."

Before he was taken into custody, Posada told reporters he was willing to abandon his asylum request and leave the US for another country. "If my petition for political asylum created any problem to the government of the United States, I am ready to reconsider my petition," he said. "My only objective is to fight for the freedom of my country."

**Chavez threatens to break diplomatic relations**

President Chavez claimed in a television broadcast that he had evidence that Posada participated in preparations for the April 2002 coup against him and that he had made repeated destabilization efforts against Venezuela, including the possible assassination of Chavez. Chavez said if the US does not extradite Posada, Venezuela would have to "put diplomatic relations under review." "It will have to be evaluated whether it is worthwhile to have an embassy in the US, if it is worthwhile that the US has an embassy in Venezuela," said Chavez, adding that his government might break relations if Posada was not extradited within 60 days.

Responding to statements that the US does not extradite to countries acting on behalf of Cuba, Venezuelan Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel said that Venezuela would not extradite Posada to Cuba but that he would be tried and punished in Venezuela. "I think it's an excuse, a subterfuge, that they are using precisely not to approve the extradition. Bringing up that he could be sent to Cuba...in this way they elude the commitment and the obligation they have to approve the extradition."

US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega called Chavez's statements about re-evaluating diplomatic relations "very dangerous," without detailing the specific dangers Chavez's ultimatum could bring about. "It is very important to recognize that extradition is a juridical, legal, formal process," said Noriega. "It is not a process of press communications and declarations to the press." Noriega said that an acceptable formal request from any government had not arrived.

On May 27 the US government rejected the first request it received from Venezuela. Venezuela recently put an end to a 35-year-old military cooperation agreement it had with the US, saying the US had been spreading a negative image of the Venezuelan government to the soldiers it was training (see NotiSur, 2005-05-13).

Antagonism between the two governments has been increasing since the entrance of US President George W. Bush into the White House and particularly after the attempted coup against Chavez in 2002 (see NotiSur, 2002-04-19).

**Bush meets with Chavez opposition leader**
In what might be seen as an effort to direct attention away from the Posada extradition issue, President Bush appeared with a top opposition leader from Venezuela in a photo shoot. He appeared on May 31 shaking hands with Maria Corina Machado, head of the nongovernmental organization Sumate, an anti-Chavez group that has accepted funds from the quasi-governmental US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Sumate was an important part of the signature-gathering effort for the recall referendum against Chavez last year (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20). Machado is accused of signing a paper dissolving democratic institutions in support of the 2002 coup against Chavez and faces charges of betraying the nation. She has alternately denied signing the document or stated that she signed a blank piece of paper.

While meeting with Bush and US lawmakers, Machado discussed, in President Bush's words, "violations of democratic principles and the Constitution by the Venezuelan government." Official party Deputy Cecilia Flores accused Machado of coming to the US to promote and get funding for "destabilization campaigns" against the Chavez government.

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