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On June 14, the Cuban government announced the June 12 arrest of one of its most highly respected generals, Arnaldo T. Ochoa Sanchez, who had commanded Cuban troops in Ethiopia, Angola and Nicaragua. Ochoa, 57, is a veteran of the Cuban revolution who was decorated for his service as a field commander of Cuban troops in Angola. He is one of only five officers awarded the medal of the Hero of the Republic of Cuba. Two days later the government announced the arrest of six more military officers including Brig. Gen. Patricio de la Guardia Font and his twin brother, Col. Antonio de la Guardia Font. As of June 25, a total of 11 military officers and government officials had been arrested. The arrested persons are accused of drug trafficking, embezzlement and corruption, or some combination thereof. Summarized below are events and statements related to the scandal and interpretations of the Cuban government's motivations for a crackdown on high-level "corruption" at this time. June 22: In a long editorial Granma, daily newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, detailed drug links some of the arrested held with Colombia's drug trafficking ring, known as the Medellin cartel. Senior military officers, said Granma, had assisted the Medellin cartel smuggle six tons of cocaine and some marijuana into the US over the last two and half years. Ochoa, said Granma, kept $200,000 in a Panamanian bank account under the name of an aide and that $25,800 was found at his house. Granma said Cuba realized "the drug trafficking has given us a severe blow," but added that Cuban narcotics organizations like the one "headed by Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and Col. Antonio (Tony) Guardia of the Interior Ministry" would not be allowed to reform. Cuban authorities seized $1,065,769 from homes of Ochoa and his collaborators, Granma said. According to Granma, Ochoa became involved in drug trafficking in 1986 while he headed Cuban forces in Angola. The newspaper said Ochoa sent an aide, Capt. Jorge Martinez, to Panama where he contacted a US citizen involved in the drug trade. Granma said the US citizen convinced Martinez to participate in money laundering that involved Ochoa. Ochoa and Martinez later contacted Rafael Pareja, a member of the Medellin cartel. Pareja told Martinez that he was working for Colombian cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria and urged him to help in money laundering and smuggling drugs into the US. Martinez traveled to Colombia with a false passport provided to him by Gen. Guardia in May 1987 to meet with Escobar, who promised to pay him $1,200 for every 2.2 pounds of cocaine shipped to the US, the report said. Granma said the drug was brought by Colombian planes to the Cuban resort town of Varadero, located east of Havana, in shipments of between about 1,100 and 1,700 pounds. Later the cocaine shipments were sent to Miami. The group managed to make five successful shipments to Miami in 1987, Granma said. There was one shipment in 1988 and the last was made April 23. Granma reported that the suspects asserted their drug trafficking activities were authorized by the Cuban government and they intended to turn over the proceeds to the government. The newspaper said, "the cynicism of these pretexts was quickly discovered" when the Cuban authorities discovered hundreds of thousands of dollars hidden in the suspects' briefcases and at the homes of their friends and relatives. Cuba's official international news agency Prensa Latina said the government will "adopt drastic measures,
including shooting down of planes that refuse to obey the order to land while flying over the Cuban territory." Prensa Latina reported that President Fidel Castro ordered the investigation leading to the arrest of Ochoa and the others in April. The investigation was undertaken, said the agency, because US charges of Cuban involvement in drug trafficking corresponded to information from "friends of Cuba" that "drug traffickers could count on the cooperation of Cuban officials." “Even though it is habitual in the United States to give room to all sorts of slanders against the Cuban revolution, the coincidences of the past several months caught the attention of President Fidel Castro," Prensa Latina said. The report said Ochoa and the de la Guardia brothers "collaborated for the last three years in the movement of drugs from South America to the United States, using their authority and official functions." The news agency said the officials admitted delivering about six tons of cocaine and said they were paid $3.4 million. Prensa Latina said the cocaine arrived in Cuba in small airplanes and was transferred to Miami-bound boats by the Cuban accomplices. Cuban involvement, said the news agency, began in 1986, when Ochoa acted as Cuba's military liaison with other nations. It said a Panamanian connection put Ochoa in touch with a "North American citizen of Italian origin named Frank Morfa." It said Morfa suggested a money-laundering scheme that in turn led to involvement with the Medellin cartel. June 23: In a letter to Defense Minister Raul Castro, Gen. Leopoldo Cintras Frias, commander of Cuban troops in Angola, called for "revolutionary rigor" in the case of his predecessor, Gen. Ochoa. The letter was published on the front page of Granma. The Colombian government has asked US intelligence agencies for information about alleged links between the Medellin drug ring and senior Cuban military officers, said Police Gen. Miguel Gomez Padilla, director of the national police. According to Gomez, Bogota had no information about these links. Prensa Latina distributed Granma's June 22 report of over 7,000 words worldwide. According to Prensa Latina, "The first show of support for the armed forces came from the generals, officials, sergeants and soldiers of the Angola mission, many of whom were under the command of the main person implicated in the narcotics trafficking, the division general, Arnaldo Ochoa. "A message from the internationalists [the troops in Angola] to the minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, Raul Castro, asks that the full force of revolutionary law fall upon Ochoa for his disloyal and corrupt conduct." According to a report by Reuter's, regardless of the Cuban government's motives for the crackdown on high-level military and civilian officials, analysts said the Bush administration has shown little interest in accepting an overture from President Castro. In 1986, the President's Commission on Organized Crime said, "Cuba and Nicaragua blatantly aid traffickers smuggling drugs from Colombia to the United States." Unidentified drug experts cited by Reuter say they have focused on the overwhelming evidence against other Caribbean islands. For instance, they say that more than 60% of drugs entering the US pass through the Bahamas. Jaqueline Tillman of the Cuban American National Foundation said the drug charges against Ochoa and others constituted a smokescreen: "Ochoa was either going to defect or do something against the regime." According to Reuter, other Cuba experts said it was more likely related to a two-year-old campaign against corruption and Castro's opposition to drug use and trafficking. Donna Rich, a Cuba expert at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, said Castro was probably using the Ochoa case to make it clear how he stood on the drug issue. "It's easier to make a point by going after somebody high-up," she added. June 24: Granma reported that a 47-member military honor tribunal will meet June 25 to hear Ochoa's case, and is to make recommendations to the Communist Party and the government on the specific charges to be brought against Ochoa and whether he should be tried by a military or civilian court. Granma carried the names of all 47 officers, including 45 generals and two admirals. The tribunal is to be headed by Division Gen. Ulises Rosales de Toro. Granma also announced that the Defense Ministry had issued new guidelines on air traffic,
including authorization to shoot down illegal flights. The Ministry said, "On many occasions, private planes violate Cuban air space and refuse to land even after repeated warnings." It added that such incidents "can only be explained by drug trafficking activities." The new guidelines specify that any flights straying from three narrow air corridors would be interrogated and forced to land. Any aircraft that did not respond would be shot down, even if pursued beyond Cuba's territorial waters, said the announcement. The Miami Herald said the Bush administration may ask Cuba for permission to interview Ochoa. AP reported that US prosecutors say the names of some of the officers now in custody in Cuba surfaced in a 1987 probe of a smuggling ring that culminated in two indictments and a 1988 trial. US Attorney Dexter Lehtinen said, "It is clear that these (Cuban) arrests are substantially connected to information generated at this trial." He refused to identify the officers. One of the Miami cases involved Hugo Ceballos, a Venezuelan, who was convicted on a 10-count indictment last year that accused him of bringing cocaine through Cuba to the Florida Keys. In March, Reinaldo Ruiz and three others pleaded guilty to a related 27-count indictment. They are awaiting sentencing. Ruiz allegedly headed a Caribbean-based smuggling ring that involved Cuban military officials. The only Cuban official publicly named in the Ruiz case was "Fidel" an apparent reference to President Castro who Ruiz, on a secretly recorded videotape, claimed was pocketing bribes from smugglers to use Cuban territory. Ruiz said he landed at military airports and had drug-laden boats escorted through Cuban waters by military torpedo boats. Lehtinen said the information revealed by Ruiz's guilty plea "was quite good, and probably embarrassed the Cuban government." He added, "They have arrested some of the people identified in that case." In its June 24 edition, The New York Times reported that Castro was mentioned in the indictment of Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega returned by a Federal grand jury in Miami in February 1988. The indictment said that Castro met with Noriega in Havana "on or about June 29, 1984," in an attempt to mediate a dispute between Noriega and members of the Medellin cartel involving the drug ring's cocaine operations in Panama. In 1982, said the Times, the chief of the Cuban Navy and three other high-ranking Cuban officials were indicted in Miami on federal drug trafficking charges. June 25: In statements during the presentation of charges against Gen. Ochoa, Defense Minister Gen. Raul Castro said Ochoa's involvement with the Medellin cartel gave Cuba a "stab in the back." He said that Ochoa was also involved in smuggling ivory and diamonds. The 47-member military tribunal met behind closed doors throughout the day at the Revolutionary Armed Forces headquarters in downtown Havana. The tribunal was to reconvene June 26. Gen. Castro told the officers that Ochoa should receive "punishment that sets an example." A 40-minute videotape of the hearing, including Gen. Castro's speech, was broadcast on the 8 p.m. news program in Havana. A newscaster said eight witnesses, all military officers, also testified at the hearing. A TV commentator said Ochoa "accepted all the charges against him and accepted his responsibility." In an interview aired on Radio Rebelde, Lt. Col. Fidencio Frias Figueredo said the maximum penalty should be applied to Ochoa. Frias, who returned from his second tour of duty in Angola on June 9, said many of his comrades in arms shared his anger. "Ochoa's attitude makes our officers indignant," he said. An unidentified Foreign Ministry official cited by AP said, "The amount of money that they control could turn anybody's head. These people talk about $4 million like it was nothing." Regarding reports that US officials wanted to talk to Ochoa, the official said, "These things are from top level to top level...This sort of thing has been done before." According to official news agency AIN, Gen. Castro said Ochoa was first reprimanded as long ago as 1970, but that his misconduct was attributed to immaturity. Castro said Ochoa was criticized for his behavior on various subsequent occasions. Castro asserted that the reprimands apparently had little effect on Ochoa's "obsessive desire to get involved in commercial ventures and convert himself in a typical capitalist businessman," in particular while
serving in Angola. Ochoa, Castro said, violated local laws in Angola with contraband of ivory and diamonds. No figures were given by AIN. Some unidentified diplomats cited by Reuters argue that Castro's puritanical attitude toward vice in the past made it inconceivable he would have allowed, even tacitly, any dealings with the drug mafia. UPI reported that last week cable television network CNN, citing unidentified diplomatic sources, said "profound" political implications lie behind the recent arrests. One source said Ochoa and other officials were apparently demanding political reforms. Last week unconfirmed reports said the Cuban government also arrested Luis Barreiros, chief of the General Intelligence Directorate. CNN reported that other intelligence agency officials are also under interrogation for alleged links to drug trafficking activities in Panama. Unidentified US Federal Aviation Administration officials in Miami cited by AP said Cuba has been granting overflight permission almost automatically to commercial and private planes. Cuba also has allowed unauthorized flights to pass through its airspace for a variety of reasons, including weather and emergencies. In San Diego, Andres Nazario Sargen, national chairman of Alpha 66, said the arrests constituted an attempt to improve relations between the US and Cuba. Nazario said Castro ordered the arrests because he wishes to improve his image as a "drug fighter," and therefore, his chances of restoring full diplomatic relations with the US. Alpha 66 is a militant anti-Castro Cuban exile organization. Nazario asserted that the arrested persons were scapegoats. Castro, he said, had been using the proceeds from drug trafficking to help finance Cuban-sponsored revolutionary activities in several Latin American countries. Next, Nazario stated that Castro's innocence about links between the arrested officers and officials and the Medellin drug ring is not believable. He said, "There is not a sparrow that flies in Cuba that Fidel doesn't know about." Nazario was in San Diego as the keynote speaker for a meeting of local Cuban Americans. In an interview with the Copley News Service, he said Castro "was not a minor-leaguer" in the narcotics trade, and that at least one major laboratory for the conversion of coca leaf into cocaine has been operating in Cuba for some time. The US broke off relations with Cuba in 1961. Small diplomatic posts, known as interest sections, were established in 1977 in Washington and Havana, permitting the re-establishment of low-level diplomatic links. Since then the US government has shown no interest in upgrading ties with Havana. Nazario said he believed the US will continue to reject Castro's efforts to improve bilateral relations as long as Cuba continues to support Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, refuses to improve its human rights record, and maintains a cozy relationship with Libya and "other international terrorist governments." The 70-year-old Nazario served as a commander in the rebel army that overthrew Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Two years later, Nazario broke with Castro and fled to the US. In October 1961, he was among the founders of the Miami-based Alpha 66. Since 1961, said Nazario, the group has committed at least 40 acts of sabotage within Cuba, and 100 of its members have been captured by the Cuban government and executed. (UPI, AP, Reuter, 06/23/89; AP, Reuter, 06/24/89; UPI, Reuter, AP, 06/25/89; New York Times, 06/24/89, 06/25/89; Copley News Service, 06/26/89)

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