Cuba: Update On Drug Trafficking Scandal, High-level Shakeup, June 29-july 1

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Category/Department: General
Published: Tuesday, July 4, 1989

June 29: Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported that President Fidel Castro fired Interior Minister Gen. Jose Abrantes because he failed to identify and stop officials linked to drug trafficking. Abrantes was replaced by Gen. Abelardo Colome Ibarra, third highest ranking military official after President Castro and Defense Minister Raul Castro. Abrantes took over as Interior Minister in December 1985. He had replaced disgraced Ramiro Valdes with the mission of cleaning up police units accused of corruption. President Castro signed the front-page Granma article appearing Thursday. Colome, 50, was the first Cuban general to head Cuban troops in Angola in 1975 and was replaced by Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez. (See Chronicle 06/27/89, 06/29/89 for summaries of prior developments.) Prensa Latina also transmitted a communique Thursday from President Castro urging all officials to cooperate with the new interior minister in an expanded narcotics investigation. The news agency said Colome would make "a profound analysis of the causes that permitted the birth of the web of Interior Ministry officials embroiled in drug trafficking." In an interview with The Miami Herald in the Oval Office, President George Bush said Cuba will have to do "much more" to deserve better ties with the US: "I am not about the shift our policy towards Fidel Castro. I would love to find a way to improve relations in a way that would help the Cuban people, but we cannot do it as long as we have a regime that appears to be as negative towards reform, towards human rights, towards...the continuous transhipment of goods into Central America..."As long as these problems exist, there will not be improved relations with Castro's regime. "Castro for years has publicly and formally denied any drug connection. And now, we've seen a mea culpa coming out of there maybe not a mea culpa, but a sua culpa, or whatever it is, that somebody else is guilty. "But recognizing that there has been a condonation of transhipment of drugs in the face of the fact that they have been publicly denied I'd welcome that, I would say that's good." More than a thousand exiles took to the streets of Miami's Little Havana neighborhood to protest a Justice Department ruling to deport anti-Castro militant Orlando Bosch. Dozens of Cuban-owned businesses shut down for three hours in a show of solidarity. The ruling ordered that Bosch, acquitted in Venezuela in 1987 of involvement in the bombing of a Cuban jetliner, should be deported because of what it described as a record of terrorist activities in the US and Latin America. Bosch, a 62-year-old pediatrician, has been in US custody in Miami since February 1988 when he was deported to the US after spending 11 years in a Venezuelan prison on charges he masterminded the 1976 bombing. Seventy-three people died in the crash. Some US observers suggest that the Cuban government's crackdown on drug traffickers is selective. According to AP, one member of the military tribunal recommending a court-martial and death penalty for Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa, Vice Admiral Aldo Santamaria Cuadrado, is himself under a 1982 federal indictment in Miami alleging he aided convicted marijuana and methaqualone smugglers. Jaime Suchlicki, head of the Institute for American Studies at the University of Miami, and author of a recent book on the Cuban military, told AP: "I think there was a official operation sanctioned by Raul and Fidel Castro, and then there was a second private operation by Ochoa, so Fidel and Raul decided to clean house." The firing of Abrantes, said Suchlicki, "is intended to put a wall between Castro and Ochoa." He
added that it is impossible for military-backed drug-smuggling operations to continue without the Castro brothers' knowledge. An administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity told AP that the US wanted Santamaria and others brought to justice, but does not rule out joint action against drug trafficking. "There have been other non-political areas where we have cooperated, like air-sea rescue," the official said. "If they are prepared to go ahead with this on a non-political basis, we would welcome cooperation." July 1: Cuban news agency Prensa Latina reported that 15 high-ranking military officers, including Division Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez and Interior Minister Jose Abrantes had been indicted by court-martial, after being stripped of their rank and expelled from the Communist Party last week. They were formally indicted by the military court in a meeting late Friday and early Saturday. Defendants reportedly belonged to a secret division of the Interior Ministry that smuggled medicines, hospital supplies and computers to circumvent a US trade embargo. Prensa Latina said military prosecutor, Brig. Gen. Juan Escalona Reguera, told the court the 15 officers conspired for 2-1/2 years to help the Medellin drug ring smuggle cocaine into the US and also dealt in diamonds and ivory. Escalona dismissed as "absurd" arguments by Ochoa and some of the other accused that they dealt in cocaine to earn dollars to help prop up the Cuban economy. Ochoa participated or directed fighting in Angola and Ethiopia and served on missions in Venezuela and to help Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista regime. (Basic data from AP, Miami Herald, Reuter, UPI, 06/29/89; AP, 07/01/89)

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