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Mexican Immigration Officials Help Smuggle Cuban Immigrants to U.S.
by LADB Staff
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The Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) has launched a major investigation of the national immigration service (Instituto Nacional de Migracion, INM), following allegations that several high-level officials participated in the illegal trafficking of immigrants from Cuba, perhaps in conjunction with a Cuban-exile organization in Florida. The Cuban-exile group is also said to have hired the Zetas, a group of army deserters who provide protection to Mexican drug cartels, to help transport undocumented Cubans to the US via Mexico.

The scheme between the corrupt officials, the Cuban-exile organization, and the Zetas might have been in place for at least the past three years, some inside sources said. The issue reflects a growing problem for Mexico, in which southeastern states are being increasingly used for human trafficking of Cubans and Central Americans.

"Kidnapping" of Cuban detainees prompts inquiry

Smuggling Cubans through Mexico has taken place under the radar, with most reports about undocumented immigrants in Mexico centering on Central American citizens (see SourceMex, 2007-08-29). The Cuban trafficking scheme came to light in early June under very bizarre circumstances. The chain of events started when the Mexican Navy detained 33 Cubans off the coast of Cancun and turned them over to the Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM). Immigration authorities then proceeded to transport the Cubans, along with four undocumented Central Americans, to a detention center in Chiapas state.

At some point during the transportation process, the bus was hijacked on a rural road in Chiapas, its whereabouts unknown for a few days. A few days later, 18 of the Cuban migrants resurfaced at the US border crossing at Hidalgo, Texas, just across the border from Reynosa in Tamaulipas state. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency immediately took custody of the Cubans, but investigators from the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) were allowed to interview them.

The Cuban migrants said they were "rescued" by the smugglers in Chiapas and taken to a private home in Veracruz state. At that point, they were given counterfeit travel documents bearing the seal of the INM. Officials at the US Office of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) declined to discuss the fate of the Cubans for reasons of "privacy and security." In Mexico, the incident prompted the Secretaria de Gobernacion (SEGOB) to launch a full-scale investigation into corruption in the INM. As a first step, Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino dismissed two high-level regional INM officials who participated in the scheme. They were Vicente Montesinos Perez, whose responsibility included the state of Quintana Roo, and Jose Luis Tenorio, in charge of the INM office in Chetumal, a community near the state's border with Belize.
While the INM officials in Quintana Roo were the most involved with the scheme, the corruption extended to other parts of Mexico. Some of the Cubans who were smuggled into the US said the bus that transported them to the Texas border passed unimpeded through various Army and immigration points in Mexico. The PGR is conducting separate investigations of at least nine officials from the INM for connections to organizations involved in human and narcotics trafficking, said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal. The concerns about widespread corruption in the INM prompted Mourino to order all INM employees to submit to a series of interviews and polygraph tests to determine whether they were involved in any illegal activities.

Mourino also announced that military escorts would henceforth accompany any INM vehicles transporting undocumented immigrants to and from detention centers. In addition, vehicles would be equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) navigators. Miami-based group, Zetas also said to be involved. The links of the INM officials could include the Zetas, a group of deserters who once belonged to elite units in the Mexican military. The Zetas were originally hired as enforcers by the Gulf cartel (see SourceMex, 2006-07-26) but have also formed their own organization (see SourceMex, 2008-05-21).

By some accounts, members of the Zetas appear to have hijacked the bus transporting the undocumented Cubans. The Procuraduria General de Justicia de Quintana Roo (PGJQR) said its investigations also revealed that drug and human trafficking are occurring concurrently and perhaps have fostered rivalries between a local gang of Cuban exiles and drug traffickers. The Gulf and Sinaloa cartels have been involved in a bloody fight for control of the Quintana Roo coast, where a large share of drugs from South America enters Mexico (see SourceMex, 2004-12-01).

Cuban expatriates, who have primarily been involved in human trafficking, appear to have moved into the drug trade, creating a rivalry with the Zetas or other drug-trafficking groups. A PGJQR investigation found that individuals involved in the drug trade carried out the murders of at least three Cuban nationals in the past few months. Two Cuban residents of the US, Nairobi Claro and Noriel Veloz, were detained with the boat on which the migrants were captured and arraigned in Cancun in June. Although offered release on bail, the two men asked to remain in custody because they feared for their lives, the PGR said.

State and federal authorities are investigating the extent that Cuban expatriates in Florida may be involved in the human-trafficking operation in Mexico. The PGR investigation found that the Miami-based Cuban-American National Foundation (CANF) has helped coordinate smuggling Cuban nationals through Mexico for several years. "The Miami-based smugglers also have connections with authorities from federal and state agencies and municipal officials from Cozumel, Isla Mujeres, and Cancun," said federal Deputy Edmundo Ramirez, who helped coordinate a study about Cuban immigration into Quintana Roo. The opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) sponsored the study.

The relationship between Cuban exiles and the Zetas appears ambivalent. While some Cubans are being killed in the struggle for control of local drug operations, the PGR probe uncovered a pattern of cooperation, and not animosity, between the CANF and the Zetas. The Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada reported that Claro and Velez acknowledged close links to the CANF and
said the Cuban-exile organization has worked closely with the Zetas for at least three years. Other CANF members who have been arrested in Mexico Ruben Tito Verdesi, Yancris Liorio, and Carlos Rodriguez Garcia have also confirmed the organization's involvement with the Zetas, said the Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio Diario.

INM statistics seem to corroborate the expansion of the human-smuggling operation in recent years. The INM reported that only about 195 Cubans were detained in Mexico in 2002. By 2005, that total increased significantly, with 2,504 detained that year. "The trafficking of Cubans through Mexico has increased to such an extent that Cubans now rank fifth among foreigners detained in Mexico," said the Merida-based daily newspaper El Diario de Yucatan. One reason for the increase is the stricter vigilance at airports in Cancun, Tapachula, and Mexico City, which had traditionally offered an entry point for Cubans.

The tighter controls are related in part to Mexico's cooperation with the US on security measures (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14). Most Cubans who seek political asylum in the US are now arriving in US territory by crossing the US-Mexico border rather than through the Florida coasts, as was the case in the 1980s, said the Merida newspaper. Like the undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America who want to enter the US, Cubans have to pay high fees to intermediaries.

The relatives of the Cubans in the US often cover the costs, which add up to thousands of US dollars. "The arrangement can be made in Miami, Mexico City, or Cancun," said La Jornada, quoting PGR documents. Some of the money is used to pay high fees to the Zetas and to bribe Mexican officials. The costs are high because of the complexities involved in the smuggling process.

"The Cuban emigrants leave the island on small boats. Once they reach international waters, they are picked up by luxury yachts or by fishing boats and brought to Mexican shores," said the PRI-sponsored study. The smugglers then dress the Cuban migrants like tourists before they are brought into Mexico. "They give them Bermuda shorts and shirts that are typically worn by tourists," said Deputy Ramirez, who also chairs a committee on population, borders, and migratory affairs (Comision de Poblacion, Fronteras y Asuntos Migratorios) in the lower house. "Once they reach Mexico, they are furnished with counterfeit documents."

Cuban officials acknowledge that the surge in human trafficking has increased the need for the Mexican and Cuban governments to negotiate an immigration agreement. SEGOB has complained that Cuba has not responded to requests for some of the detainees to be repatriated back to the island nation, but Cuban officials dispute that allegation. "That is not true," said Miguel Aguilera de la Paz, Cuba's ambassador to Mexico, who said his government is trying its best to accommodate Mexico's requests. Aguilera de la Paz pointed to an even greater problem, the ease by which Cubans are admitted to the US. "What we have been discussing all along is that this is an operation of smugglers that takes advantage of the flexible rules afforded Cubans to enter the US," he said.

Former Cuban President Fidel Castro called on the Mexican government to make a greater effort to discourage the use of its territory for smuggling Cuban citizens to the US. In a piece written in the Cuban newspaper Granma, he said Mexico should not be complicit with the US and a 1966 law that gives the executive branch the discretion to adjust immigration laws to accommodate Cuban
immigrants. "What is worse is that a larger number of citizens from Mexico and Central and South America seek to enter the US without the benefit of such a law," said Castro. "And more than 500 die each year in this attempt."

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