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LADB Staff

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Arrest of Czechs Strains Relations

by LADB Staff

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The arrest in January of two Czech citizens on charges of contacting Cuban dissidents for subversive purposes strained already difficult relations between Cuba and the Czech Republic. The incident focused attention on the activities of the Washington-based organization Freedom House, which sponsors contacts by Central Europeans and others with Cuban dissidents.

On Jan 12, Czech nationals Ivan Pilip and Jan Bubenik were arrested in Ciego de Avila, 300 km southeast of Havana. Pilip is a co-founder of the right-wing party Freedom Union and a member of the Czech Parliament. Jan Bubenik was a student leader during the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and a former member of parliament. The two Czechs met with dissidents Roberto Valdivia of the Comite Cubano Pro Derechos Humanos and Antonio Femenias, an independent journalist. Valdivia and Femenias denied the Czechs gave them money or any subversive materials. After his release, however, Pilip said he and Bubenik gave the dissidents a computer and other items.

Cuba has long regarded certain types of contact with dissidents as US-sponsored subversion, particularly after the Helms-Burton Act in 1996 authorized a range of direct contacts with dissidents to aid in the "transition to democracy" (see NotiSur, 1996-03-01). In 1996 and 1999, Cuba enacted laws prohibiting the activities provided for in the Helms-Burton Act. Cubans and their foreign contacts could face prison terms of up to 20 years (see EcoCentral, 1997-04-17, NotiCen, 1999-03-11).

Cuba says Czechs were working for US organization In a statement issued Jan. 23, the Cuban Foreign Ministry (MINREX) said authorities arrested the two men because they violated their tourist status by meeting with "subversive" organizations in accordance with instructions from Freedom House. The statement identified Freedom House as a "US-based counterrevolutionary organization," set up to promote subversion. Freedom House spokesman Michael Goldfarb declined to comment on the Cuban claim that the organization had provided the two dissidents with a computer. But Freedom House president Adrian Karatnycky said, "When people travel, they have a fundamental right to talk with whomever they wish." The arrests received widespread condemnation from human rights organizations and the international community.

The Czech Foreign Ministry said the charges were "groundless and incompatible with principles the Czech Republic as well as other democratic states profess." The international organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the case showed "how flawed the Cuban Criminal Code is." Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of HRW's Americas division, said, "Cuban laws provide cover for all kinds of human rights abuse." The Czech News Agency reported that Czech political parties were sparring with each other about the incident. Miroslav Macek, deputy chair of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), called the Pilip-Bubenik trip a "theatrical public-relations affair" in the case of Pilip. As for Bubenik, he said, the trip bordered on "showing off."

ODS leader Vaclav Klaus said the trip was "harmless" but an ineffective way to promote democracy in Cuba. He said the state should worry about its citizens detained abroad but should use more standard approaches in promoting democracy. Petr Pithart, president of the Czech Senate, traveled to Cuba Jan. 26 to try to negotiate the release of Pilip and Bubenik. Returning empty-handed to Prague, Pithart said that, after a meeting with President Fidel Castro, he understood that Cuba did not link the arrests with Czech votes against Cuba's human rights record in recent resolutions by the UN Human Rights Commission (see CubaSource, 2000-05-10).

In a Jan. 23 communique to foreign diplomats in Havana, the Cuban government offered to release the men if they appealed to Cuban "generosity" and admitted they erred in meeting with the dissidents. Although Czech President Vaclav Havel opposed an apology, Pilip and Bubenik signed a statement apologizing for their activities and admitting they inadvertently broke the law. However, after his release, Pilip said that, because they were acting on behalf of Freedom House, they knew they might be arrested. On Feb. 6, the two men were released. Back in Prague, Pilip told reporters he had made a similar trip to Cuba for Freedom House 15 months earlier. He said that the arrests were a blow to Freedom House and that recruitment for future trips to Cuba would now be almost impossible.

Czech government response is ambiguous

The Czech government's response to the arrests was a mixture of surprised incomprehension and acknowledgement that the arrests might have had something to do with the increasingly bitter Cuban-Czech relations. Pithart said, "Castro is a realist, he knows that no one in the Czech Republic is responsible for the activities of Mr. Pilip and Mr. Bubenik, with myself not being responsible at all." He concluded that Pilip and Bubenik were pawns in the Cuba-US "game." President Havel likewise insisted that the Czech government was not responsible for the activities of two Czech tourists in Cuba. Pilip agreed with the interpretation that the arrests were part of the Cuba-US conflict. "All questions during the interrogations were aimed at the role of the United States in our trip," he said. But he also alluded to the strained relations between Cuba and the Czech Republic, noting that their Czech citizenship made their situation in Cuba worse. "Czechs are considered close allies of the United States in Cuba," he said.

Cuba-Czech relations have been deteriorating for several years. In the UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Geneva last year, the Czech government co-sponsored a resolution condemning Cuba's human rights record. It sponsored a similar resolution in 1999. After the 2000 resolution, Castro called the Czechs US "puppets," and he mounted a public-relations blitz against the Czech government, charging that Czech diplomats had been supporting Cuban dissidents with money and supplies since 1989 (see CubaSource, 2000-05-10). In its Jan. 23 statement, MINREX said that, for several years, the Cuban government had monitored Czech diplomats engaged in "subversive activities" coordinated by the US Interests Section in Havana. The report said that, after 1987, the Czech Republic had become the Interests Section's "main center of subversion" in Cuba. MINREX cited the example of Czech diplomat Petr Mikyska, who served in Cuba from 1992 to 1996. MINREX said he worked closely with the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) serving as liaison between CANF and "subversive elements" in Cuba.

In a Feb. 2 interview with the Prague daily Pravo, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Kavan speculated that the Cuban attitude might have resulted from "our victory in the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1999 and in 2000, when we pushed through a resolution condemning the abuses of human rights in Cuba." The statement appeared to acknowledge that Czech policy had drawn the government into the Cuba-US "game." As for any such resolution this year, Kavan said the commission should pass a "balanced" resolution that included condemnation of US economic sanctions against Cuba. He said the Czech government was "interested in renewing a political and economic dialogue" with Cuba.

Arrests focus attention on Freedom House

Freedom House was founded in 1941 as an anti-fascist organization. It later turned its attentions to anti-communist activities during the Cold War. In its most recent mission statement (1999), Freedom House says it works to "assist democratic forces and democratic voices seeking to bring freedom to closed societies through advocacy, technical assistance, and material support." The organization reports that it carries out "research, advocacy, education, and training initiatives that promote human rights, democracy, free market economics, the rule of law, independent media, and US engagement in international affairs."

MINREX charged that Freedom House recruits journalists and others from Central Europe who are experienced in promoting "democratic transitions" and who are then sent to Cuba "to undertake destabilizing and subversive actions." The ministry says it has tracked hundreds of such contacts by journalists and others from Central Europe sponsored by Freedom House, "all of whom were trained in subversive tactics and paid with US government funds."

The MINREX account says the two men traveled from the Czech Republic to Cuba via Washington and Cancun, Mexico. In Washington, they met with Freedom House official Robert Pontichera, who gave them US\$1,400 for travel expenses and a list of dissidents to contact. They were to deliver a laptop computer and other materials to people on the list and to return via Washington to give Freedom House a coded list of Cuban dissidents.

Freedom House executive director Jennifer Windsor acknowledged that the organization runs a program to promote contacts among democratic activists in Cuba. "Such efforts are considered to be a normal activity in most countries," she said. State Department denies connection with Czechs "Meeting with peaceful political activists and carrying a list of activists' names is not considered a crime in most countries of the world," said US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "The US Government did not supply the two with any cash or equipment. Nobody from the US government met with the two before their trip. They were not on a US government trip; they were on a trip sponsored by a very well-respected international nongovernmental organization." However, Boucher did not mention the US government's financial support for Freedom House authorized under US law.

While Freedom House is a nonprofit organization supported by tax-deductible grants and donations, it also receives funding from the US Information Agency (USIA) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The Cuban Democracy (Torricelli) Act of 1992 authorized

USAID to set up the Cuba Program to fund nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that "promote nonviolent democratic change in Cuba." The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Helms-Burton) Act of 1996 authorized assistance to individuals and NGOs in Cuba in support of "democracy-building efforts." Cuba Program assistance may take the form of providing books and videos on such topics as democracy, human rights, and market economies. Government funds may also be used to donate typewriters, fax machines, and other equipment; to give direct humanitarian assistance to victims of political repression; and to support visits to Cuba by international human rights monitors. The Department of State implements the program through its Office of Cuban Affairs in Washington and the US Interests Section in Havana.

A report by the firm Pricewaterhouse-Coopers, which USAID contracted in 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the Cuba Program, said private funding for these activities has amounted to US \$150 million in the last several years. Since 1996, when government funding began, USAID has granted US\$8.2 million to NGOs and universities under the Helms-Burton provision. During that time, USAID gave Freedom House US\$750,000 to support its program of providing informational materials to Cuba, paying for trips by foreign activists to Cuba, and disseminating the writings of Cuban dissidents. US funds go to exile organization Of the ten programs funded by USAID in 1998, four were run by Cuban exile organizations. The Miami-based Institute for Democracy, headed by Rafael Sanchez-Aballi, received US\$400,000 to send food, medicine, and written materials on human rights and free markets to Cuba.

The Washington-based Center for a Free Cuba, headed by Frank Calzon, received US\$400,000 to send books and videos on democracy and to send foreign visitors to contact Cubans interested in labor rights, human rights, and journalism. US\$250,000 went to the Miami-based Cuban Dissidence Task Group to support its work with dissidents in Cuba. US\$120,000 went to the Miami group Cuba Free Press, which disseminates articles written in Cuba by dissident journalists.

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