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Cuba News in Brief

by LADB Staff

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A prominent Cuban exile in Miami has been indicted for defying a US presidential proclamation that prohibits boats from departing Florida with the intention of entering Cuban territorial waters. The Honduran government opened an interests section in Havana and has signaled its intention to move soon toward full diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Cuban exile leader indicted in Miami

On Sept. 5, a federal grand jury in Miami indicted Cuban exile leader Ramon Sanchez, leader of the anti-Castro organization Democracy Movement, and two others for illegally entering Cuban territorial waters. The three men took a speedboat inside Cuba's maritime boundary on July 14 to commemorate the anniversary of the deaths in 1994 of 41 Cuban refugees whose boat was struck and sunk by Cuban gunboats.

After the 1996 downing of *Hermanos al Rescate* planes off the Cuban coast (see *NotiSur*, 1996-03-01), President Bill Clinton signed an executive order prohibiting small vessels from sailing into Cuban waters from anywhere in Florida except the northern panhandle. Boats intending to enter Cuban waters must get a permit from the Coast Guard. This is the first indictment for violating the proclamation.

If convicted, Sanchez could lose the boat, and all three could be imprisoned for up to 10 years and fined US\$10,000. In his defense, Sanchez said the indictment violated his civil rights because it punished nonviolent protesters. He said the presidential proclamation violated his constitutional right to travel. Furthermore, he said, the US does not have the authority to patrol Cuban waters. Clinton's proclamation, however, did not imply US authority over Cuban waters, but rather banned departures from the security zone he established around Florida.

Sanchez said the arrest was unjustified because the Democracy Movement was unfairly singled out for punishment, since some 3,000 boats have received permits since 1996. However, Coast Guard spokesman Ron LaBrec says a review of applications showed no permits have ever been granted to protest groups. Last year, Sanchez signed a settlement agreement in Federal Court in which he acknowledged that the presidential proclamation was "lawful, valid, and constitutional." He signed the decree to get back a boat impounded after he entered Cuban waters in 1998.

Sanchez's attorney Kendall Coffey apparently plans to put up a free-speech defense. "It's pure free speech that has been criminalized," he said. Max Castro, a researcher at the University of Miami's North-South Center, suggested that Sanchez made the incursion to test the resolve of President George W. Bush's administration to enforce the proclamation. "They're trying ...to see if this administration will be more favorable to their provocations against the Cuban government from U.S. territory," he said.

Some commentators suggest Sanchez was hoping to cause an incident similar to the 1996 shutdown to draw the US and Cuba into a confrontation. In a 1999 profile on Sanchez, Miami New Times writer Jim DeFede said, "His goal is to create scenarios that almost certainly would lead to violent responses from the Cuban military, responses Sanchez hopes will spark a new revolution in Cuba, but which could just as easily draw the United States into a clash with the island nation."

Cuba, Honduras re-establish ties

Honduras opened an interests section in Havana on Sept. 15, ending a 40-year period of icy relations with Cuba. Foreign Minister Roberto Flores said opening the office was the prelude to re-establishing full diplomatic relations with Cuba. In 1997, the two countries signed an agreement in preparation for interests sections, and Cuba opened its office in Tegucigalpa in 1999. Honduras broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1961 after Cuba was expelled from the Organization of American States (OAS). In recent years, the two countries have forged several informal ties. The Cuban government sent doctors to Honduras after hurricanes struck in 1974 and 1998. Several hundred Honduran students are enrolled in a Cuban medical school, and the two countries also have various cultural and sports agreements.

In 1998, President Carlos Flores insisted that he would not consider normalizing relations until Cuba showed progress toward democracy. The remark was in reply to a National Assembly resolution calling on him to explore the possibility of normalization. The private sector went further than the administration by formally asking Flores in July to re-establish full diplomatic relations with Cuba. The Asociacion Nacional de Industriales (ANDI) wrote the president, saying, "The government should not delay in officially re-establishing diplomatic relations between these two brother nations."

In August, Foreign Minister Flores signed an investment- protection agreement in Havana during the first official visit of a Honduran foreign minister since 1961. Honduras and El Salvador are the only Latin American countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Cuba, but El Salvador remains committed to the status quo. As President Carlos Flores traveled to Havana in August, Salvadoran President Francisco Flores said, "I have always thought we were two brother peoples, but it is impossible at the present time to establish relations."

President Francisco Flores and President Fidel Castro engaged in a heated exchange during the Ibero-American Summit last year when Castro accused the Salvadoran government of harboring terrorists (see NotiCen, 2000-11-30). A major point of friction is the case of two Salvadorans convicted by a Cuban court in 1999 of terrorist acts committed in Cuba. They are awaiting completion of their death sentences (see NotiCen, 1999-04-22, 2000-11-30).

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