

10-4-2001

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuban Condolences After Sept. 11, but Lack Grace." (2001). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8888>

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Cuban Condolences After Sept. 11, but Lack Grace

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2001-10-04

The Cuban government has responded to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the US with a combination of condolences to the people of the US and a condemnation of US government policies. Through official government statements and remarks by President Fidel Castro, Cuba has both offered its support to the US and called upon President George W. Bush to respond to terrorism with caution.

Following the attacks in the US, Castro advised US leaders "to act calmly, to act with equanimity, not to allow fits of rage or hate to move them and not to begin to hunt people down, dropping bombs everywhere." Later, he read a formal government statement given to the international press offering condolences to the people of the US "regarding the painful and unjustifiable loss of human lives that these attacks have caused." The statement also said, "Cuba's position against all terrorist actions is known. One cannot forget that our people have been the victims for more than 40 years of such actions promoted from the territory of the United States."

As is customary in times of disaster, Castro offered medical assistance. "We offered what we could if they needed it," he said. "America is a country with great scientific and medical development and resources, but there might come a time when there is a shortage of blood or plasma or any other products. If we could provide something, we would do it happily."

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher acknowledged that Cuba had condemned the terrorist attacks, but added, "Unfortunately, statements made by Castro and other Cuban officials contained gratuitous comments of no consolation to those who have suffered so greatly from these attacks."

Castro made the "gratuitous remarks" in a speech broadcast on state television. He took pains to address his remarks to the people and not the government of the US, reminding viewers that the people of the US had halted the war in Vietnam. To get US citizens to support an unjust cause, he said, you first have to deceive them. He advised the international community "to put an end to a series of conflicts throughout the world...and to put an end to global terrorism." "If this economic and unfair social order that led the world to a catastrophe continues to expand, there will be no escape for the 6.2 billion people on the planet today."

Castro referred to the long history of US assassination attempts against him and bombing and other terrorist attacks against Cuba, including the 1998 bombing campaign against Havana tourist hotels and restaurants (see EcoCentral, 1997-10-02). Havana claims the campaign was sponsored by the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation (CANF). Castro said there were antecedents to the Sept. 11 attacks. He said extremist exile groups in the US planned to leave explosive devices in commercial airliners in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America, and that the Cuban government had given US authorities reliable information on them during President Bill Clinton's administration.

"If they really wish to, they could abort in time this new form of terrorism." "This tragedy is the consequence of the application of terrorist methods against Cuba and other countries," Castro said. "The United States is the nation with the largest number of organized extremist groups."

Cuba abstains on anti-terrorism declaration

During the Sept. 21 meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS), Cuba refused to sign an anti-terrorism declaration, a step similar to the one it took at the Ibero- American Summit in Panama last year when Spain asked for a condemnation of the Basque ETA separatists. In both instances, the Cuban position was that such declarations should condemn all terrorism, including that directed against Cuba by exile groups in the US. In a statement to the OAS delegates, Cuba asked to be excused from voting on the declaration because some of the member states have never condemned the "execrable acts" committed against Cuba for the past 40 years. While rejecting the OAS declaration, Cuba announced Oct. 3 that it would participate in UN resolutions against terrorism. Cuba had previously signed three such UN accords but has now informed the UN that it will sign the remaining nine after a call by the UN for unity following the Sept. 11 strikes.

Convicted spies were Cuba's "humint"

Referring to the five Cubans convicted in Miami on spy charges earlier this year, Castro said they were defending Cuba from terrorism directed against Cuba (see EcoCentral, 1998-09-24, NotiCen, 2001-06-21). During their trial, Castro acknowledged the five were Cuban agents, but insisted they were in the US to infiltrate extremist exile groups to gather information on their intentions against Cuba. The Cuban view, expressed in a Radio Havana editorial, is that the five were the human intelligence or "humint" that the US government admits it does not have but wishes it did, "to combat this very same kind of despicable terrorism that has so stupefied the world after its use against the US."

On Sept. 21, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested Ana Belen Montes, a senior analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in Washington, charging her with espionage. A Washington Post article said the FBI accelerated the arrest after the Sept. 11 attacks out of fear she would pass information from the intelligence community's computer site Interlink to other countries, "particularly some in the Middle East." The FBI said that evidence obtained from her personal computer indicated she had links to Cuban intelligence.

Cuba still on terrorist list

The US State Department keeps a list of states that it says harbor terrorists. Currently, seven countries are on that list: Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, and Syria. Curiously, Afghanistan was not on the 2000 list. State Department Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Michael Sheehan said that was because the US does not recognize the Taliban government of Afghanistan. The Taliban is not hostile to the US, he said, and "in fact, they repeatedly tell me that they want good relations with the United States, and I believe that to be a sincere desire" (see CubaSource, 2000-06-09).

During a press briefing on last year's report *Patterns of Global Terrorism* Sheehan acknowledged Cuba was "not involved directly in terrorism," but said that it harbored past terrorists and had links to "foreign terrorist organizations." Those organizations are the ETA and the Colombian guerrilla organizations Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN). The terrorist attacks on the US have renewed arguments regarding the extent to which the US government has sponsored terrorism against Cuba and what history Cuba has of terrorism.

Dennis Hays, executive vice president of CANF, said, "Castro has a long history of supporting terrorism, and he continues to support terrorism. Is it just because he hasn't killed anybody this week that he should get a free pass?" CANF spokeswoman Mariella Ferretti said, "I don't dismiss for a second the possibility of a relationship between Havana and Osama bin Laden."

However, Wayne S. Smith, former head of the US Interests Section in Havana and a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy in Washington, said the "past terrorists" mentioned by the State Department are "a few aging Basques" allowed to stay in Cuba under an agreement between Cuba and Spain. There is no evidence that the fugitives from US justice in Cuba are involved in terrorism, Smith said, and since Cuba and the US have no extradition treaty, there is no formal way to send them home. Smith said the links to foreign terrorists is a reference to the Colombian guerrilla groups, with which other governments, including Venezuela and Colombia, also have contacts. The contacts in Cuba have been meetings relating to peace talks, he said.

The continuation of Cuba on the State Department's terrorist list casts a peculiar light on recent warnings by administration officials. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Sept. 16 that the US would take steps against countries that harbor terrorists. But the administration has not mentioned Cuba as a target for retaliation. On the contrary, the State Department requested assistance from Cuba and several others on the list. The Cuban Foreign Ministry confirmed diplomatic contacts with the US in Havana and Washington regarding the exchange of information on terrorism as well as other issues such as trafficking in persons.

A ministry official said, "I would be very pleased if this cooperation took place. It would prove common sense prevails." Though the State Department publicly offered Cuba nothing in exchange for cooperation, US Ambassador in El Salvador Rose Likins said the US would fight against every kind of terrorist, including "Cubans in exile." She told the San Salvador daily *Prensa Grafica* that "terrorists are terrorists." "One of the points on which we agree with the Cuban government has been on the struggle against terrorism," said Likins.

Some organizations critical of US Cuba policy, including moderates within the Miami exile community, have urged the Bush administration to remove Cuba from the terrorist list. Several such groups signed a statement saying, "In this new world context dominated by the struggle against terrorism, Cuba clearly will not be an unquestioning ally, but it need not be an enemy. Indeed, given the challenges we now face, it is not in the interests of the United States to treat it as an enemy." Signatories included representatives of the Alliance for Responsible Cuba Policy, Americans for Humanitarian Trade with Cuba, *Cambio Cubano*, and the Center for International Policy.

The Washington Post reported on a Sept. 22 conference in Miami on terror and sabotage originating in the US. During the conference, a panel discussed terrorism committed by right-wing Cuban exiles. In the catalog of incidents is the 1966 car bombing of a Miami radio commentator, the 1973 bombing of a Miami magazine office, and many others. Max Lesnik of the Alianza Martiana, which helped sponsor the conference, said, "The fight against terrorism should start in Miami, here at home. They don't have to go to Afghanistan to find terrorists."

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