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Cuba Cooperates with U.S. on Prisoner Transfer

by LADB Staff

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A surprise move by the Cuban government to cooperate with the US in its transfer of Taliban and al Qaeda prisoners to the US Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay has led to speculation that a thaw in bilateral relations is underway. Though the State Department has denied there will be any change in its Cuba policy, some Cuban-exile groups are suspicious that a secret deal has been struck by the two countries that could lead to lifting the embargo.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld announced on Dec. 27 a Pentagon plan to send the prisoners to the Guantanamo base. The base, located on Cuban's southeast coast, has been leased from Cuba since 1903. The announcement was first met with silence from the upper levels of the Cuban government. Foreign journalists precipitously wrote reports assuming that Cuba would object to the plan since the base represents a century-old remnant of the US military occupation of Cuba after the War of 1898.

Agence France-Presse reported that President Fidel Castro would "protest and denounce the measure." Reuters reported that Cuba opposed the plan, and supported the view with comments from Cubans on the street and taxi drivers, who saw the plan as defiance of Cuban sovereignty. Officials interviewed by the foreign media, such as Higher Education Minister Fernando Vecino Alegret and Attorney General Juan Escalona, also expressed personal opposition to the Pentagon plan.

But on Dec. 29, the Cuban Foreign Relations Ministry released a statement that said, "Taking into account that various versions have been published on the position of Cuba on the matter of the transfer of foreign prisoners to the naval base at Guantanamo, the Ministry of Foreign Relations wishes to declare that the government of Cuba does not yet have the necessary elements to make a judgment and has therefore not adopted any position." After a brief review of how the US acquired rights to the base, the statement said, "a basic principle of Cuba's policy toward this bizarre and potentially dangerous problem between Cuba and the United States...has been to prevent our claim from becoming a major issue...among the multiple and grave differences existing between the two nations." While stressing that the prisoner transfer violated the original agreements to lease the base to the US, the statement said, "We shall not set any obstacles to the development of the [transfer] operation." The statement went on to say Cuba was willing to cooperate with the US by providing medical and sanitation services and "in any other useful, constructive, and humane way that may arise." The Cuban government gave as one reason for its cooperation the willingness of the US to inform Cuba beforehand that it planned to house the prisoners at the base and to guarantee that the presence of the prisoners would not affect Cuban security.

A Jan. 11 statement from the Cuban government said Cuba was "especially careful" near the Guantanamo base because it was a place where anyone could provoke a clash between Cuban and US military forces that could lead to "aggressive actions against our people." Defense minister

promises return of any escaped prisoners Cuban Defense Minister Raul Castro visited a military outpost overlooking the base on Jan. 19 accompanied by a group of invited foreign journalists. Responding to a reporter's question, he said that, if any prisoners on the base were to escape into Cuba proper, Cuban authorities would return them.

The surprising reaction of the Cuban government to Rumsfeld's announcement coincided with a discussion in the Cuban parliament (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular) about the imprisonment in Miami of five Cuban agents convicted last year of spying (see EcoCentral, 1998-09-24, NotiCen, 2001-06- 21). The five are now considered national heroes. Before his visit to the Guantanamo outpost, Raul Castro led a rally in San Antonio, Guantanamo province, protesting the heavy sentences meted out to the five agents. The prisoner transfer also coincides with a sudden increase in the stream of visitors from the US. The visits by members of Congress and business executives reflect the increasing interest in normalizing trade since the post- Hurricane Michelle sale of food and medicine to Cuba (see NotiCen, 2001-11-29).

Illinois Gov. George Ryan led a group of pharmaceutical executives looking for trade possibilities. This was his third business-related junket to Cuba. Some analysts are saying the Castro government has decided to cooperate on the prisoner issue to avoid the appearance of being on the wrong side in the US-led war against international terrorism and to avoid antagonizing the US at a time when Cuba wants the release of the five imprisoned agents and normal trade relations.

Commenting on the increase in these delegations, parliament president Ricardo Alarcon said the possibilities of restoring normal relations with the US were becoming "more evident." Similarly, Raul Castro said the cooperation on the prisoner issue showed there could be steady improvement in bilateral relations. However, he indicated that Havana was not relying on gestures alone to prod the US into relaxing the embargo, but on the growing disapproval of the embargo in US popular and congressional opinion. Nevertheless, he said, some attitudes within the US government run in the direction of keeping bilateral relations frozen.

US says there is no thaw

While Raul Castro, Alarcon, and other high-level Cuban officials spoke of advances toward normalized relations, Washington saw no such improvements. In late January, the State Department said the policy of isolating Cuba was unchanged and that last year's trade agreement was a one-time exception to the embargo. The US considers the sale of food and medicine a humanitarian gesture permitted under the embargo rules, while Cuba presents it as a possible prelude to normal commerce. Speaking of maintaining the longstanding policy, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "It's not a question of our relationship, it's a question of the Cuban government's continued denial of basic human rights."

In Havana, chief of the US Interests Section Vicki Huddleston called Cuban cooperation a "charm offensive." "What happens if you give a lot of money to the Cuban government and it doesn't change?," she asked. "Then you find out you are just supporting Fidelismo." Another sign that Washington sees no advances in relations with Cuba is the recent surfacing of old accusations that Cuba harbors Basque and Colombian terrorists. In February, as the prisoner transfer went on, a

State Department official told a Senate committee that the Cuban government was harboring 20 members of the Basque separatist organization ETA and supporting Colombian guerrillas.

A spokesperson for the Cuban Interests Section in Washington dismissed the US charges, noting that ETA members deported from France in the 1980s were in Cuba at the request of the Spanish government and are forbidden "to carry out any activities against Spain." The spokesman also reminded the US that representatives of the Colombian guerrilla organizations Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (ELN) were in Cuba along with Colombian government representatives to participate in peace talks at the request of Colombian President Andres Pastrana. Exiles have mixed opinions on cooperation Cuba's policy of accommodation ran counter to expectations and surprised the Cuban-exile community in Miami, which could not settle on a unified response.

Right-wing Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) visited the base at Guantanamo and said she was "delighted" that it was being put to use and kept in operation "so that when Cuba is free, we can use it to help build democracy." By contrast, Ramon Sanchez, leader of the exile organization Democracy Movement, objected to using Cuba as "a dumping ground for the undesirable of the world." He wrote President George W. Bush, asking why the prisoners were sent to Cuba and not somewhere in the US. Sanchez has credentials as strongly anti-Castro as Ros-Lehtinen's, and has recently been indicted for conspiring to run boats into Cuban territorial waters from the security zone set around most of the Florida peninsula (see NotiCen, 2001-09-27).

The State Department considers Cuba a sponsor of terrorism, so Cuban exile leader Jose Basulto asked why the US was sending terrorists to a terrorist country. Looking at the terrorist issue another way, Cuban parliament president Alarcon said that if the US was consistent in its war on terrorism, it would "clamp down on those among the exile movement in Miami who have taken part in violence against Cuba. If the United States were consistent, some of these people would end up in cages in Guantanamo."

Some exiles were dumbfounded by Castro's accommodating mood and suspected it had to do with some secret deal with the US that signaled a softening of policy within the administration. Ten Miami-based groups, including the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), Basulto's Hermanos al Rescate, and Sanchez's Democracy Movement, issued a declaration condemning the congressional and business delegations who visit Cuba and lunch with Castro.

CANF executive director Joe Garcia said the visitors were trying to convince dissidents in Cuba of the need to end the embargo. Basulto said he was worried about the Bush administration's "current steps" toward surrendering to pressures by US economic interests to resume trading with Cuba. He said that, if the administration tried to normalize relations, it would find itself in "a confrontation with the Cuban-exile community."

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