

3-14-2002

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Cubans Who Invaded Mexican Embassy Removed

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2002-03-14

Twenty-one Cubans violently invaded the Mexican Embassy in Havana on Feb. 27 and asked to go to Mexico. Acceding to a request from the Mexican government, Cuban police and military peaceably removed them. By most accounts, the intruders were responding to rumors that Mexico was opening its doors to all comers. The rumors were linked to radio broadcasts from Miami that reported ambiguous remarks by Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda.

Castaneda made the remarks on Feb. 26, during the inauguration of the Mexican Cultural Institute and a new Mexican Consulate General in Miami. Early the next morning, the US government-funded Radio Marti began broadcasting news accounts of Castaneda's speech, repeating eight times during the day that Castaneda had said that the doors of the embassy of his country in Havana are open to all Cuban citizens, the same as they are in Mexico. The broadcasts also quoted a statement Castaneda made during Mexican President Vicente Fox's visit to Havana earlier in the month to the effect that relations between Mexico and the Cuban Revolution have ended and relations with the Republic of Cuba have begun (see NotiCen, 2002-02-28). The Miami and Havana statements were later cited by some as evidence that Mexico had sharply altered its Cuba policy and was now offering visas to anyone who wanted to leave Cuba.

Later the same day, 21 Cuban men commandeered a city bus and crashed through the gates of the Mexican Embassy. Others who had gathered at the embassy because of the rumors were turned back by police as they tried to follow the bus on to the embassy grounds. After meeting with the 21 intruders and failing to convince them to leave the embassy, Mexican Ambassador Ricardo Pascoe Pierce asked the Cuban government on March 1 to remove them from the building and said Mexico would not press charges against them. While no injuries were reported in the removal operation, several people were hurt in the bus highjacking and crash. Cuban sources said at least four people were hurt including some passengers and the bus driver.

Mexican Embassy personnel said that, during their interviews with the intruders, all 21 said they wanted to go to Mexico, but none asked for political asylum or claimed political persecution in Cuba. Nevertheless, the Miami exile organization Cuban Liberty Council asked President Fox to grant them political asylum. "Under no circumstances should they be handed over to Cuban authorities in whose hands they will face brutal reprisals," said a spokesperson.

An official Cuban government statement described the intruders as anti-social "lumpen" manipulated by the Miami exile "mafia" and US government. The statement said 13 of the 21 had arrest records, mostly for armed robbery, but also for arms and drug possession. "None really is motivated by political ideas or objectives," the statement said. President Fidel Castro said that 122 others arrested near the embassy had similar records and were detained for attempting to join the embassy invasion. The number of arrests has varied from the 122 Castro cited to the 150 reported in most of the international media and the "hundreds" mentioned in an account issued

by the nongovernmental Comision Cubana de Derechos Humanos y Reconciliacion Nacional. Cuban officials later confirmed that some were released but were vague about the numbers. The Cuban World Data Service said only five were released, including the three minors among the 21 hijackers. Castro said the others would be punished "according to the degree of their dangerousness and participation."

News accounts of the embassy incursion were contradictory because of the lack of agreement on the meaning of key politically loaded words. Many media reports called the gate crashers "asylum seekers," though none asked for asylum. Likewise, The Miami Herald saw a human rights issue in the incident. The newspaper said in an editorial that Mexico's talk of respecting human rights was "hollow" because it asked Cuba to remove the intruders from the embassy. The editorial did not mention the hijacking or injuries to bus passengers as crimes. Although none claimed persecution in Cuba, according to Mexican diplomats, the Herald retroactively conferred the status of persecuted on them, arguing that, after hijacking a bus, crashing it into the embassy, and shouting "down with Fidel," they now risked state retribution.

Castaneda's words are debated

Likewise, Castaneda's remarks about open doors were subject to interpretation. Fox held an urgent meeting with Castaneda to get clarification on what he said. Fox's governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) released a statement questioning "the strange origin" of the embassy intrusion and repudiating "distortions and manipulations" of Castaneda's words by unnamed persons. Spokespersons for Radio Marti denied accusations that the repeated broadcasts of Castaneda's open-doors statement were meant to provoke an invasion of the Mexican Embassy. They rejected Castaneda's claim that the incursions resulted from "a small provocation" by anti-Castro radicals in Miami. In a television interview, Castaneda said the Miami open-doors speech had been taken out of context. As for the Castaneda doctrine of leaving the Cuban Revolution behind and dealing with the Cuban government, he said that only meant that Mexico must move away from its traditional Cuba policy based on the "emotional" appeal of the revolution and Cold War politics and move toward an everyday relationship based on trade, tourism, and common interests.

In a transcript of Castaneda's Miami speech contained in a press release from the Mexican Foreign Relations Secretariat, Castaneda said the Mexican Cultural Institute in Miami was for the benefit of all Latin Americans and the Latin community of Miami. "Here, there is room for all points of view, all artistic expressions, political opinions, all the perspectives proper to Mexico and to Latin America," he said. After the speech, he was asked by a reporter what he said to Cuban dissidents during a brief meeting with them at the embassy in Havana during the Fox visit.

Castaneda replied, "Many [of the dissidents] have visited Mexico in the past, they no doubt will do so in the future and well, [the doors of the embassy] would be open to any Cuban or Latin American citizen who is interested in visiting Mexico or being in contact with the representatives of Mexico in Cuba or in any other country in Latin America." The press release called these comments simply a restatement of Mexico's policy of openness in all its missions abroad and said Castaneda's remarks could not be interpreted as either a change in Mexico's migratory policies or as an invitation for Cubans to leave their country.

US response is low-key

Like the Elian Gonzalez saga (see NotiCen, 1999-12-23), the embassy incursion prompted all major players in the Cuban-US cold war to interpret the event in terms of their own political catechism. The official US response was subdued and avoided any consideration of the 21 intruders as political-asylum seekers, perhaps out of concern to avoid a repetition of the 1980 Mariel boatlift debacle that stemmed from a similar invasion of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana. US government spokespersons fell back on generic policy statements to answer questions about the incident. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said such incidents would not occur if Cuba were a free society, if Cubans could select their government, have a free market, "and thereby benefit from the economic advantages that a free society would provide."

Castro blames US

During the nightly television round-table discussion Mesa Redonda, Castro gave a detailed report on the embassy events linking them to the upcoming meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva where the US hopes to get a condemnation of Cuba. He said the intrusion had not damaged relations with Mexico or his opinion of President Fox. He said of Castaneda, "I'm exonerating him from blame, because I don't believe that was his intention, nor did he agree with it, political differences aside." But, he said, Castaneda "shouldn't go around playing with words."

In Castro's view, Cuban dissidence is "manufactured" by the US, and the embassy episode was a manifestation of the hatred of the exile "mafia" for the Cuban Revolution. During the discussion and on other occasions, he and Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque have showed impatience with Castaneda's diplomacy. But Castro has been careful to separate that from the larger goal of mending relations and increasing economic ties with Mexico. Castro added that "no one will ever leave the country by forcing their way into an embassy." No embassy wants to have Cubans parked permanently on their property, he said.

Exile organizations blame Castro

Despite Mexican clarifications of the open-doors speech, exile leaders in Miami said Castro had planned the embassy intrusion. Joe Garcia, director of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), said Castro had "organized and orchestrated" the incursion in retaliation for Fox's attempt to promote human rights and democracy in Cuba. Other leaders said they were disappointed that Castaneda agreed with Castro's claim that the incident was a provocation emanating from Miami. Experts consulted by the Miami Spanish-language daily El Nuevo Herald suggested Castro's motives were to undermine Castaneda at home, attack Radio Marti and the Miami exiles, stir up opposition to the US Cuba policy in Congress, and perhaps unleash a horde of asylum seekers on Florida. Several exile organizations called for a 90-day boycott of Mexican products and tourist destinations.

Ninoska Perez, spokeswoman for the Consejo por la Libertad de Cuba an organization of disgruntled former CANF members, said the boycott was a response to Mexico's capitulation to

"economic interests and shows [Mexico's] great hypocrisy." However, neither CANF, Hermanos al Rescate, nor several other prominent exile organizations supported the boycott. CANF's Joe Garcia told the Spanish News Service EFE that his organization would concentrate instead on getting Mexico back to a "correct" Cuba policy, which presumably meant having more contact with dissidents instead of turning them away at the embassy door.

Hermanos al Rescate leader Jose Basulto said it was unfair to single out Mexico for retribution because the embassy incident was "orchestrated in Havana." "Once again, the government of Cuba may triumph in its efforts to make the Cubans in exile dance to their tune," he said.

Mexico adopts Cuba's position on incursion

The Mexican interpretation contrasted sharply with that of the exile organizations. Ambassador Pascoe Pierce said Mexican authorities believed the intrusion was too sophisticated to have been undertaken without outside planning. "We do not believe that these [21] people, by themselves, organized an operation of this kind," he said. He told Agence France-Presse, "The idea was to corner Mexico on the eve of the voting in the UN Human Rights Commission." Castaneda in trouble Castaneda's critics in the Mexican Congress have been pressing for his removal for some time, accusing him of following the US line too closely and fumbling in his dealings with Cuba, Spain, and other nations.

Opposition parties say the embassy break-in was a result of his tactless disregard for the consequences of his speech in the politically charged atmosphere of Miami. Alejandro Sanchez Camacho, a Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) member of the Mexico City Legislative Assembly, accused Castaneda of acting as a US puppet and suggested he resign for departing from Mexico's established Cuba policy.

The Mexican news magazine Proceso noted that CANF officials were invited guests at the opening of the cultural center where Castaneda made his open-doors remarks. Proceso said this was the first invitation the Mexican Consulate General in Miami had ever made to an anti-Castro organization.

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