

Clinton to Tighten Sanctions on Cuba

Charter Flights Halted; Legislation Backed

2/27/96

By Ann Devroy
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Clinton, retaliating against Cuba for shooting down two U.S. civilian aircraft piloted by members of an exile group, said yesterday he will halt all charter flights between the United States and Cuba and support legislation imposing tighter sanctions on that country.

The two moves were among political and economic sanctions announced by Clinton after a Cuban MiG-29 fighter jet downed two Cessna aircraft in the Straits of Florida near the Cuban coast on Saturday.

Clinton also will ask Congress to use some of the \$100 million in Cuban assets frozen in the United States to compensate families of the four men aboard the planes, who are missing and presumed dead. He also will limit travel in the United States by Cuban diplomats and will increase the number of frequencies used in broadcasts by U.S.-operated Radio Marti into Cuba.

In his brief statement, Clinton continued to make the U.S. case that shooting down unarmed civilian planes, whatever the provocation and whatever their location, is a "flagrant violation" of international law. "Although the [Cuban American] group that operated the planes had entered Cuban airspace in the past, this is no excuse for the attack," Clinton said.

While Clinton reiterated the U.S. account that the attack occurred in international airspace, the Cuban government insisted it has "unequivocal proof," including records of cockpit conversations and radar tapes, that the two planes were in Cuban airspace and were warned before the attack. (Details, Page A5.)

The Cuban stand constituted a direct challenge to the U.S. version of events, and seemed to foreshadow a strong diplomatic counteroffensive

See POLICY, A5, Col. 1

POLICY, From A1

in the U.N. Security Council against a U.S. proposal condemning Fidel Castro's government for the incident.

The downed planes were flown by Brothers to the Rescue, a Miami group of volunteer pilots who fly missions to search for Cuban rafters leaving the island and to protest Castro's rule.

Administration officials acknowledged that with a full trade embargo already in place, Clinton's response was likely to have only a modest effect on Cuba's economy. But a White House official said the president was attempting to avoid imposing "too much misery" on Cuban citizens while still sending "a signal that if this happens again, the response can be much harsher."

Outside of military action, which the White House quickly ruled out, the administration could have taken a range of other actions including withdrawing all diplomats from Cuba and ending U.S.-Cuban phone service. Clinton left in place his recent easing of curbs on Cuban-American financial remittances and steps to facilitate U.S.-Cuban media operations.

On Capitol Hill, members of Congress who were pushing the so-called Helms-Burton bill to tighten sanctions against Cuba even before the shoot-down said the incident will ensure passage. They also confidently predicted a presidential signature even if provisions are included that the White House once opposed.

Despite Clinton's pledge yesterday to seek fast action on the legislation, officials said he remains opposed to a provision in the House version that is opposed by U.S. allies. It would allow Cuban Americans and others to sue in U.S. courts for compensation from foreign companies that buy property that Castro had confiscated over the past three decades. The White House and Senate previously had opposed that measure, and the White House said it will attempt to negotiate a compromise.



Simon Ferro of Florida, left, and Carlos Portes of New Jersey speak with reporters outside the White House after meeting to discuss U.S. response to Cuba's downing of exile group's planes.

BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

The legislation, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), also would bar countries from buying Cuban sugar and other products, and then reselling them in the United States as a way of getting around the trade embargo in effect since the 1960s. It would cut aid to Russia if Moscow supports an electronic intelligence-gathering facility in Cuba, and orders the administration to try to block Cuba from joining international financial institutions.

"The legislation will be on the president's desk before the blood dries on Castro's hands," Helms said yesterday. He has asked key lawmakers to meet Wednesday to finish work on the bill.

A Clinton measure with quick, direct impact is the suspension of direct air travel between the United States and Cuba. Current U.S. regulations allow journalists, families with relatives in Cuba and government officials to apply for special permits to travel there. About 120,000 to 140,000 individuals traveled to Cuba from Miami last year under those regulations.

Under the new sanction, "people won't be flying from Miami to Cuba anymore," said one senior official. He asked that Americans avoid flying to Cuba from other countries, the main way visitors have avoided travel restrictions.

The United States also has asked the United Nations to consider international sanctions,

which will be debated at the United Nations this week. One such step could be curtailing Cuba's landing rights in other countries.

Clinton officials briefed key members of the Cuban American community, a potent political force in Florida and New Jersey in particular. Jorge Mas Canosa, leader of the Cuban American National Foundation, said the administration "has taken the first steps in the right direction, but we hope these are not all the steps."

The White House said the president's actions were not taken with an eye to domestic politics, but senior officials had fully expected Republican presidential aspirants to accuse Clinton of being soft on Castro.

That they did, but not with the force that some in the administration had expected. One administration adviser said, "We expected an explosion and got a popgun" from the GOP. The Democrat speculated that the issue is not potent in states currently holding primaries.

Senate Majority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) accused Clinton of "coddling" Castro by trying previously to ease sanctions. Dole also called the new sanctions weak, saying that after the incident Clinton "wrung his hands for two days and today at 4:30 [p.m. EST] he laid an egg."

Malcolm S. "Steve" Forbes Jr., another candidate, called for a tighter economic embargo against Cuba, while commentator Patrick J. Buchanan called the shoot-down an "atrocious." If he were president, Buchanan said, he would "have American fighter planes patrolling the Florida Straits, and I would tell Mr. Castro that if his planes are up there shooting at civilian aircraft . . . in international waters, he will lose his air force."

Staff writers William Booth, Sue Ann Pressley and Edward Walsh, with the GOP candidates, and Guy Gugliotta contributed to this report.