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Cuba's Brutality

NO ONE CONCERNED for regional stability and air safety can fail to condemn Cuba's brutal downing of two small unarmed civilian planes on Saturday. In this latest mission by Brothers to the Rescue, the two planes and a third that made it back to Miami had in fact ignored Cuban warnings as well as official American cautions not to penetrate Cuban airspace. Nor was it clear whether their purpose was the stated humanitarian one of rescuing fleeing rafters or the alleged political one of overflying Havana. But this is no excuse for the attack. In such circumstances, international law requires warning off the approaching aircraft. Instead, the Castro government, having considered for months how to react to these flights, ignored American urgings to stay on a peaceful and legal path and shot to kill.

The Cuban attack caught President Clinton at a difficult time and place. He does not wish to be outflanked politically in a potential swing state, Florida, with a large Cuban-exile population and a presidential primary coming up two weeks from today. Nor does he want, in expressing the prevailing and justified outrage, to let it overwhelm his previous efforts to open up certain avenues of communication and relief for the Cuban people, or to interfere with agreed procedures of legal emigration. Hence the measures

he announced yesterday to notch up pressure on the Communist regime, including suspending Havana-Miami charter flights and working with Congress to selectively tighten an already tight embargo.

Given the tensions Fidel Castro churns on the American scene, the Clinton proposals were bound to be attacked not only by Republicans campaigning for their party's presidential nomination in Florida but also by harder-line factions among the state's million Cuban Americans. From these sources now come calls for a military response—an air patrol to knock down rising Cuban MiGs or a blockade to keep Fidel Castro from either receiving foreign ships or expelling a new flood of refugees to Florida.

These measures would be counterproductive. If put into effect, they would leave the United States largely isolated among other nations. The better course remains to keep international diplomatic and private influence focused—in discussions on ending the embargo, for instance—on opening political space for human rights advocates, independent social and professional organizations, and democrats. As the recent crackdown on Concilio Cubano demonstrates, this isn't easy. But over time it offers hope.