

U.S. Data Forced Cuba To Retreat on Shooting

Basulto Bragged of Buzzing Havana Previously

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Senior CIA officials held an unannounced and highly unusual meeting with Cuban intelligence officers in New York last month to show them U.S. intelligence data demonstrating that two small U.S. civilian planes were not in Cuban airspace when a Cuban jet fighter shot them down, Clinton administration officials said yesterday.

Washington arranged the encounter and provided entry visas for six Cuban military intelligence officers to call the bluff of Cubans who were telling the United Nations they had solid evidence that the unarmed Cessnas were downed inside Cuba's 12-mile territorial limit, the senior U.S. officials said.

The ploy worked, they added. Cuban Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina, who had been telling the United Nations he had "all the conversations, all the maps" to prove Cuban airspace had been violated, backed down after the CIA briefing. Reports at the time noted that Robaina retreated from his position but did not say why.

In a separate development, tapes of radio broadcasts were made available yesterday showing that regardless of whether the two U.S. planes were in Cuban airspace, Fidel Castro's government had good reason to believe they were headed Havana's way.

Six weeks before the shutdown, on Jan. 15, Cuban American exile leader Jose Basulto admitted on the U.S. government-owned Radio Marti station to having violated Cuban airspace two days earlier. Basulto also suggested it might happen again and promised to "do something" every month to challenge Castro.

In another Radio Marti broadcast on Jan. 16, a paid commentator taunted the Castro government by suggesting that Cuba failed to take action against planes operated by Basulto's Brothers to the Rescue group because of the "deterioration

of its ability to respond. . . . They cannot take any action against even a peaceful strategy," said commentator Jose Casin.

When Basulto told Radio Marti about his exile group's Jan. 13 leaflet drop over Havana, he was already under investigation by U.S. civil aviation authorities for violating Cuban airspace in July.

Asked how U.S. officials reacted to the January incident, Basulto provoked laughter from his interview-

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ers when he said the U.S. government shutdown had put authorities "on vacation," a "positive thing" that had helped his organization pull off the operation.

Radio Marti broadcasts 24-hour-a-day Spanish language news, entertainment and public service programs heard throughout Cuba but generally unavailable in the United States.

The station has drawn frequent criticism both inside and outside the U.S. government for news coverage skewed in favor of hard-line anti-Castro exile groups based in Miami. The station has been the subject of an internal audit by the U.S. Information Agency, its parent organization, for more than a year.

In the Feb. 24 shooting incident, a Cuban military jet shot down two private planes piloted by Miami-based members of Brothers to the Rescue. Basulto, the group's leader, was flying a third plane that escaped and returned to Miami.

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Cuba said that all three planes had violated Cuban airspace, but the United States countered that only Basulto had done so, and condemned Cuba for taking drastic action against unarmed aircraft. The incident led directly to President Clinton's decision earlier this week to sign a bill tightening the 35-year-old trade embargo against Castro's communist government.

In the international uproar that followed the shooting, Cuba and the United States squared off in the United Nations with contradictory claims over whether the two planes were downed in Cuban or international airspace.

When U.N. members asked the United States to show its evidence that the shooting occurred more than 12 miles from the Cuban coast, the United States agreed to make classified data available, a senior administration official said yesterday. When the Cubans made the same request, "we made a policy decision" to show them what was being shown to other delegations at the U.N., the senior official said.

According to accounts given by administration officials and other sources yesterday, members of Cuba's U.N. delegation said they had no one technically competent to evaluate the U.S. data and asked permission to bring specialists to this country.

Washington agreed. Six Cuban military officers, all holding the rank of colonel or lieutenant colonel, picked up visas in Mexico and flew to New York to be briefed.

"Robaina was saying he would produce incontrovertible evidence" to support Cuba's position, a senior U.S. official said, "and we were saying they had nothing other than the rhetoric. When our evidence was deployed, we didn't hear anything more."

This was not the first time the CIA has revealed the fruits of its labors to a communist regime in order to prove a point. A few years ago the agency stunned North Korean officials by showing them detailed evidence to support the U.S. conclusion that North Korea was trying to develop nuclear weapons.

But the meeting with the Cubans may prove more controversial. As news of the encounter spread on Capitol Hill in the past day or two, some members of Congress said that one of the Cubans admitted for the briefing may have been the commander of the pilots who shot down the U.S. planes. If so, he should have been arrested, not given a secret intelligence briefing.

A CIA spokesman said the agency had no information one way or another about the officer's alleged role in the shutdown.

USIA Director Joseph D. Duffey declined to comment on the Jan. 15-16 broadcasts on Radio Marti, including the interview with Basulto, but agency personnel granted The Washington Post permission to listen to tapes of the two "En Vivo" ("Live") programs, hour-long mixes of news, commentary and music broadcast on weekdays.

In the first, Basulto refused to tell interviewers how Brothers had carried out the Jan. 13 leaflet drop: "Basically the objective was Havana and the surrounding area," he said. "A point about three miles from the center of the city was chosen . . . but it was inevitable that the leaflets would fall in several locations."

Basulto said the leaflets bore passages from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and slogans like "Cubans, fight for your rights." He said the Brothers were urging all Cubans, "every 13th of the month," both in Cuba and the United States, to take action. "We will all do something, some act of opposition, of direct civic action against the government."

He stressed that his planes were unarmed, that he advocated getting rid of the Castro government "in a nonviolent way" and that the Brothers' activities enjoyed "no type of complicity or help from the United States."

These broadcasts and the flights by the Brothers reportedly infuriated Castro. A group of retired U.S. military officers who toured Cuba a few weeks before the shutdown said the Cubans complained vociferously about the flights and said the U.S. government was partly to blame for them because the FAA accepted Brothers flight plans showing false destinations.