

Case of Cuban Plane Bombing Puts

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Washington Post Foreign Service

CARACAS, Venezuela, Oct. 26 — Trinidad deported two Venezuelan suspects in the firebombing of a Cuban plane to Venezuela today, presenting the government of President Carlos Andres Perez with a political hot potato.

Leftists across the hemisphere have been crying for the blood of suspects Hernan Ricardo, 25, and Freddy Lago, 31, since the death of 73 persons in that Oct. 6 crash. The event has become the focus of a widening fracas over the strength of international opposition to Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

"We don't want them," said several members of the ruling Democratic Action Party in separate interviews, referring to the two men. They explained that the mere act of bringing the men to trial would infuriate—and possibly even be sabotaged by—the anti-Castro Cubans in Caracas, whose real political strength they insisted has never been fully evaluated.

But failure to prosecute successfully would infiltrate Castro and endanger the left-of-center image Perez

has been courting, so far successfully, among Third-World nations.

"The trouble is we know that any good lawyer could get them off on any charges we could bring from here," one Venezuelan official said. The government could prove the suspects had some ties with anti-Castroes being held in Caracas, but a conspiracy case would be hard to prove.

The crash occurred five miles off Barbados, which says its territory extends only three miles. The case is therefore out of its jurisdiction.

The two men were arrested in Trinidad, which said it could only charge them with false documentation. Both nations are worried about the effect of the publicity on their tourist trade. Venezuela's problem reflects the ups and downs of the ruling party with Castro and his enemies. President Perez and the party's grand old man, Romulo Betancourt, took refuge in Cuba from the Venezuelan dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez in the early 1950s, before Castro was even in the mountains plotting against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista.

When Betancourt came to power in Venezuela in 1958, Caracas was the

site of a public anti-Batista meeting that included Castro's representatives. "We sent money, arms—we were up to our necks in that," recalled a party stalwart.

Castro visited President-elect Betancourt in Caracas a scant three weeks after taking power in Cuba in January 1959. He got a hero's welcome but shocked the democratic leader by suggesting that Betancourt summarily throw out the Yankees, who at that time were enriching Venezuela with their oil wells.

Betancourt and his young Cabinet vice minister, Carlos Andres Perez, then turned against Castro when Cuban-inspired terrorists began working in Venezuela. As refugees started coming in from Cuba, the government welcomed them.

"We hired a lot in the security police in the early '60s, because who would know better how to combat the Cubans than a Cuban?" one official remembered. The same thing, several

said, occurred in that period in the United States. "Of course" there was close contact among U.S. and Venezuelan officials and the two growing exile communities, he added.

Perez at that time was renowned for his tough-cop style as minister of the interior. The security police was strong and feared. Many Cuban exiles held prominent positions.

Other Cuban exiles found haven in the Venezuelan communications media, taking middle-management and high technical jobs they hold today in Caracas' two major newspaper enterprises, in three of its four television stations and at several magazines.

As the guerrilla threat receded, Betancourt's successors gradually softened the police, retaining only a few Cuban refugees. Of an estimated 800 members, no more than a score of its officers are now Cuban exiles, one source said. These include Orlando Garcia, No. 2 man, and Ricardo Morales Navarrete, a former CIA opera-

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tive in Miami. Luis Posada, one of the four men held in the plane crash case, was operations chief from 1971 to 1973.

The agents have remained strongly anti-Castro and tolerant of his enemies, leftists and rightists agree, as long as their efforts have not caused unpleasant publicity. Political leaders have been generally indifferent to the low-profile Cubans, none of them ever having studied the estimated 20,000 to 35,000 refugees as a possible voting or power bloc.

Although the anti-Communist right strongly supported Perez in his 1973 election, their feelings did not deter him from "normalizing" relations with Castro in the interest, as he put it, of realistic world relations. Since then, Betancourt has led part of the party in railing at Castro and his influence in Venezuela.

"We are well connected," admitted Salvador Romani, a prominent anti-Castro figure and magazine columnist,

Although he insisted that the CIA is "no longer helping us the way they used to," many of his critics insist Romani is a CIA operative. Other leaders—such as Orlando Bosch, now being held in the plane crash—have come and gone here freely between arrests in other countries, carrying funds, according to party sources.

At the same time, the Cuban embassy here has an estimated 130 persons, compared to the three that Venezuela has at its embassy in Havana. "I don't think they're engaged so much in espionage as propaganda and intelligence gathering," said an opposition politician. "Venezuela is the main force for legitimizing Cuba in the hemisphere now and Castro has no reason to want to overthrow it."

With both sides of the Castro issue newly vocal and a major decision looming, President Perez's position now is increasingly difficult. Party leaders say the contradictions will soon have to be resolved.