

Cuban Exiles Still See War As Live Option

Some Fear Playing Into Castro's Hands

By William Booth
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MIAMI, Jan. 13—About a mile beyond the last suburban tract house, where civilization ends and the Everglades begins, aging veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion are dreaming dreams of vengeance and liberation.

On Sunday, about 40 Cuban exiles belonging to Alpha-66, a paramilitary organization, trained with live ammunition in scrubby wetlands west of Miami, in a field ringed with abandoned washing machines and old tires.

The military exercise, seen by many Cubans here as an anachronism, took on new life after the arrest last month in Cuba of three Miami-area men who landed there armed with guns and explosives. Fidel Castro's government branded them "counterrevolutionaries" and sentenced them last week to death by firing squad.

The sentence came as anti-Castro forces here are renewing efforts to get the United States to support, or at least condone, direct military strikes against Cuba. Virtually all Cuban exiles here agree that Castro must go, but there is volatile debate about how to make him do it.

"The solution has to be a military one—that is the only way," said Humberto Perez, 48, a construction worker and military chief of Alpha-66 who said he survived the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by U.S.-backed exiles.

Miami's Cuban community has branded the three captured men as both fools and heroes. Their raid is seen as a fiasco that will provide Castro a propaganda bonanza or a noble act inspiring all Cuban exiles to take up arms.

Miami radio waves are filled with calls to sign a letter urging President Bush to allow renewal of exile military action against Castro.



Alpha-66 members drive through Miami's Little Havana section to protest death sentences given to three heavily armed Miamians apprehended in Cuba.

The campaign is being promoted by Cuban station Radio Mambi in response to the newly declassified letters exchanged by President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The letters show that Kennedy refused to sign any ironclad pact prohibiting a U.S. attack on Cuba.

Perez was among about 300 people gathered at an intersection in the heart of Miami's "Little Havana" neighborhood Sunday. They displayed signs urging Bush to "save our brothers from death in Cuba." Car and truck horns blared, and Cuban flags waved through sunroofs.

On hand were the wife, father and brother of Daniel Santovenia, 36, one of the captured infiltrators. His wife, Teresa, cried. His aging father was visibly shaken.

"They didn't kill nobody," said Santovenia's brother, Eduardo. "He didn't fire a shot. Now they're going to kill him. It was stupid. But he does not need to die."

Maria Antonia Gonzalez, mother of infiltrator Pedro de la Caridad Alvarez Pedroso, 26, told the Miami Herald, "My anger is less with what happened in Havana than with those who helped organize this crazy idea."

The third man was Eduardo Diaz Betancourt, 38.

"The extremists are using this moment to fuel a campaign to get

Washington to take . . . a military action against Fidel," said Damian Fernandez, a Cuba scholar and professor of international studies at Florida International University here. "It will backfire. Fidel is a master at manipulating public opinion, and he is going to do it again."

Ricardo Bofill, president of the Cuban Committee for Human Rights, a Miami-based organization with links to dissidents in Cuba, said infiltration attempts merely benefit a Castro government facing economic chaos after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

"Fidel Castro can play this spectacularly well as sign of aggression orchestrated from the U.S.," he said. "This gives the Castro government some breathing room. They have created a sort of hysteria in a country where opinion is massively controlled, and this sort of propaganda tends to last a long time."

Bofill, whose organization favors a negotiated approach for the return of democracy in Cuba, said violence is outdated. "For us, democracy cannot be conquered using pistols and bombs," he said.

U.S. citizens are forbidden by law from waging war on other countries. The anti-Castro paramilitary groups say they avoid this stricture by launching missions from third countries, such as the Bahamas.

Special correspondent Ricardo Castillo contributed to this report.