

U.S. Renews Denials of Any

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The State Department yesterday renewed denials that the U. S. government was involved in any plans to attack Cuban territory. This followed a Soviet charge on Monday that Washington was behind "acts of sabotage" against Havana.

The denial by State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray followed a Tass commentary supporting Cuban allegations that the United States was involved in "pirate acts against Cuba" and that two ships seized this month by Havana were owned by persons having connections with the Central Intelligence Agency.

While Cuban exile groups with headquarters in Miami have attempted to stage what have become known as "pin-prick attacks" on Cuban shores, U. S. officials said they had no reason to believe that either ship—the Lyla Express

seized Dec. 5 or the Johnny Express seized Dec. 15—were engaged in anything but commercial pursuits.

Following the seizure of the Panamanian registered Johnny Express in Bahamian waters, the United States warned Cuba that it would take "all measures under international law" to protect American and other ships against Cuban attacks.

The State Department characterized the Cuban action as a "clear and present threat to the freedom of navigation and international commerce in the Caribbean and a threat to American citizens."

In its commentary Monday, Tass called the naval alert "completely groundless" and charged that the two ships, owned by Cubans who had taken political asylum in the United States, "were widely used by the Central Intelligence Agency . . . for criminal actions" against Cuba.

The ships belong to the Bahama Lines, run by four brothers, who are Cuban exiles and who have been involved in Cuban exile affairs. Tass said that when the vessels were seized, "they had on board armed thugs who were to land on Cuban territory and to stage acts of sabotage."

There is no clear indication why Cuba moved against the two ships now. But informed officials in Washington are inclined to see it as retaliation connected with a recent strafing attack by Cuban exiles on a Cuban fishing village. In that incident, Cuban exiles claimed credit for a landing at Boca de Sama on Cuba's northeast coast on Oct. 12. Two persons were killed and four others injured.

Radio Havana blamed that attack on "the government of the United States and its accomplices." A Cuban exile group headed by Jose Elias de la Torriente claimed responsi-

bility and called it the beginning of a series of actions to overthrow Fidel Castro.

Some U.S. officials also suggested that there might be a connection between the seizures and the current visit to Moscow of Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticos. He arrived there yesterday on what Tass called a "friendship visit."

News of the visit took U.S. officials by surprise. U.S. officials noted that Cuba has frequently used the continuing U.S. threat against the Castro regime as a lever for winning Soviet aid. They noted that the aid agreement between the two countries generally comes up for renegotiation in January and that the Dorticos visit might be preliminary to that negotiation.

State Department officials said the United States tried to discourage exile plans to attack Cuba and noted that the Coast Guard has frequently picked up Cubans on suspi-

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THE WASHINGTON POST
Wednesday, Dec. 22, 1971 A 9

icious expeditions. The officials said it is a violation of his immigration status for an exile to become involved in any political activity.

The action by the Castro government against the two vessels coincided with a move by Peru in the Organization of American States to lift sanctions imposed in 1964 against the Cuban regime. In an informal OAS on Dec. 13, Peru sought to sound out the attitude of other members toward a resolution to let states establish diplomatic, consular, commercial relations with Cuba.

The United States took the position, as announced by State Department spokesman Robert J. McCloskey on Dec. 16, that "present circumstances do not justify altering the OAS decisions on sanctions since by virtue of its continuing interventionist behavior and its support for revolution, Cuba remains a threat to the peace and security of the hemisphere." In a formal, closed

meeting Friday, Peru withdrew its suggestion.

Tass connected efforts by some Latin American countries to improve relations with Cuba to the U.S. naval alert in the Caribbean. "The wide movement for normalization of relations with Cuba that spread in the Western Hemisphere causes extreme irritation in Washington circles," the commentary said. "They refuse to reconcile themselves to the bankruptcy of their policy of isolation of Cuba and now resort to every means to make Latin American countries continue to follow their anti-Cuban course."

Mexico never broke relations with Cuba, and Chile has recently reestablished its ties with the Castro regime. Sources at the OAS suggested that a new effort may be made to lift sanctions against Cuba at the annual meeting in April.

State Department officials, while denying any U.S. gov-

ernment connection with the two vessels that were seized, left open the possibility that the ships, and their owners, may at one time have been involved in anti-Castro activities. But they suggested that that may have been in the heyday of Cuban exile activity between 1961 and 1963.

Cuba's official Communist newspaper "Granma" called the denial by the U.S. government of any connection with the seized vessels a "shameful lie" comparable to Washington's original denial of any involvement in the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. But State Department officials said the ships are involved in a regular steamship service between Miami, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

They add that according to crew lists supplied by the Bahama Lines there were no Cubans aboard the Johnny Express, except for the captain, Jose Villa, a Cuban-born U.S. citizen, and two Cubans aboard the Lyla Express.