

P A JAMES

U.S. Rejects Cuban Bid Defectors' Return

Associated Press

The United States yesterday received and rejected for the time being a demand by Cuba for return of a Cuban military helicopter and two defectors who hijacked it and took it to Florida on Friday.

But the United States did agree to turn over to Havana authorities the body of the helicopter's pilot, who was killed in the dramatic escape, and a 17-year-old crewman who wanted to go home.

An envoy from the Czechoslovakian Embassy, which represents Cuban affairs here, yesterday presented the State Department with a Havana note calling for return of the helicopter and all those aboard including the body of the pilot.

The note charged that the two defectors had committed desertion, theft, treason and murder.

A State Department spokesman said that the deputy coordinator for Cuban affairs, William Bowdler, told the Czech diplomat, Counselor Jaroslav Zantovsky:

1. A U.S. plane is standing by in Miami to take the body of the pilot and the crewman who wants to return, Sergio Rogge, 17, back to Cuba as soon as Cuban authorities give landing clearance for the plane.

2. The two defectors, Guillermo Santos, 20, and Andres Ezaguirre, also 20, can be returned to Cuba against their will only under extradition proceedings through the U.S. courts. That would put it up to the Fidel Castro regime to make a court case if it can.

3. The helicopter is being held pending further investigation of the case.

[At an impromptu news conference, President Johnson said he was "looking very carefully" into the situation and had conferred earlier in the day with Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara about the incident. If there is any official statement, he said, it probably would come from one of the two Cabinet members.]