

Cuba Claims Proof Planes Crossed Line

By John Ward Anderson
Washington Post Foreign Service

HAVANA, Feb. 26—Cuba insisted today it has "unequivocal proof," including cockpit conversations and radar tapes, that two U.S. civilian planes shot down Saturday were in Cuban airspace and were warned before coming under attack by a Cuban warplane.

The Cuban stand, in a Foreign Ministry statement later amplified by a ranking Cuban official, constituted a direct challenge to the U.S. version of events. It seemed to foreshadow a strong diplomatic counteroffensive in the U.N. Security Council to fight a U.S. proposal condemning President Fidel Castro's government for its decision to shoot down the two small aircraft from Miami.

The Clinton administration has accused Castro's military of a "blatant violation of international law" by carrying out the attack. According to U.S. officials who provided a detailed account, a Cuban MiG-29 shot down two single-engine Cessna 337 Skymasters in international waters without giving them the radio or visual warnings prescribed by international procedure.

But Ricardo Alarcon de Quesada, a Cuban Politburo member and president of the National Assembly, told reporters here that Secretary of State Warren Christopher is a "liar" for having handed out that version of what happened in an appearance before television cameras at the White House Sunday. Alarcon, buttressing his government's claims at a news conference, said Cuban sailors have recovered debris from the destroyed planes in Cuban waters off Havana, while U.S. rescuers searching international waters farther offshore have found nothing.

"We have unequivocal proof," the ministry statement declared.

The ministry cited the radar records, taped conversations and the debris found just offshore. But it released none of these for inspection.

The fate of the four men piloting the planes remained uncertain. A third plane, which U.S. officials acknowledged entered Cuban airspace, returned safely to Florida.

The planes were operated by a Miami-based Cuban exile group, Brothers to the Rescue, which in the past has helped locate and

rescue Cuban refugees trying to float to the U.S. mainland. More recently, the group has also made provocative flights over Havana, dropping leaflets calling for the overthrow of Castro's government.

They were warned by the Cuban government that their planes would be shot down if the flights continued.

A Cuban pilot, Lt. Col. Francisco Perez Perez, said in an interview on state-run Radio Rebelde that he and the pilot of a second plane were ordered to intercept the civilian planes Saturday after they crossed into Cuban territory. They located the errant planes, he said, but when the civilian pilots ignored warnings to leave the area, a second order came to bring them down.

The pilot did not say what type of warning he gave the Brothers to the Rescue planes or

Ministry statement said the planes were intercepted five to eight miles north of Baracoa Beach, which is just west of here. Cuba declares 12-mile territorial waters.

The incident has sparked a round of recriminations from Washington, which has said one of the planes was shot down five miles north of the 12-mile limit and the other 16 miles outside it. Even if they were inside Cuban waters, Clinton administration officials declare, Cuba used excessive force in shooting down unarmed civilian aircraft.

Havana, in response, has said the planes were a threat against its national sovereignty and ignored repeated warnings issued after previous flights, in addition to the warnings on Saturday.

The event, coming at the beginning of the presidential campaign season, has dragged Cuba into U.S. domestic politics as Republican presidential contenders use it to attack Clinton's more moderate policy toward the island. Alarcon blasted the U.S. government for not trying harder to curtail the flights.

"The U.S. failed to do absolutely anything to stop those activities," Alarcon said.

According to reports from Washington, the United States has warned the group not to fly over Cuba and is investigating the organization and its founder, Jose Basulto, for repeated flyovers of the island nation.

"We are facing a clear case of provocation—a provocation rooted in a practice . . . about which the U.S. was perfectly knowledgeable," Alarcon said, adding that the group's pilots "were alerted time and again" about the dangers of violating Cuban airspace.

In a surprising development, meanwhile, Cuban state television broadcast an interview with a man who became a member of the Brothers to the Rescue group after defecting to the United States four years ago. Juan Pablo Roque, a former Cuban MiG pilot who recently returned to Havana, said in the interview that the group was involved in plans to smuggle arms into Cuba to assassinate Cuban leaders, with Castro as a principal target.

Residents in the Cuban capital seemed divided over the downing of the two planes. Some said it was justified, saying it was similar to the action they would take if they discovered a burglar in their house.

"In 1995, they came in a plane and dropped pamphlets with propaganda against our country," said Argelio Mirabal, 55, a taxi driver. "Those were just papers, but these planes could come some time with bombs."

But other Cubans said that their government overreacted.

"They should have found a better way," said an unemployed 31-year-old merchant sailor. "They could have forced the planes away without firing shots."

His father, who asked that the family not be identified, agreed.

"China, Vietnam, everybody has made peace with the United States, but not our government, because our president is a hard man like Saddam or Gadhafi," he said.