

Cuban Action's Timing Puzzling to Observers

Economy Has Turned Up After Long Fall

By Douglas Farah
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SAN SALVADOR, Feb. 26—For the last year, the Cuban government has worked diligently to end its isolation. It obtained foreign financing for a crucial sugar harvest and reestablished diplomatic and trade relations with countries across the hemisphere. It even signed an unprecedented agreement with its nemesis, the United States, to stop illegal immigration.

These recent successes, which have accompanied a small but significant improvement in the Cuban economy after years of decline, make the decision to shoot down two civilian aircraft belonging to the Miami-based Brothers to the Rescue group perplexing to many Cuba analysts.

A U.S. official traveling here with Secretary of State Warren Christopher said Washington has come up with "no credible explanation" for why the Cubans, after tolerating months of illegal flights, decided to shoot the planes down now. Washington has concluded at this point that the incident was a "screw-up," he added.

But other Cuba analysts said possible explanations for the incident flow from two directions. Ironically,

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one is Cuba's economic improvement over recent months, which has caused uneasiness among Marxist hard-liners in the government. The other is the deep-seated hatred and distrust that have separated those who chose to live with Castro after the Cuban revolution triumphed in 1959 and the thousands who fled the island for the United States, 90 miles away.

Many in the hard-line Cuban American community in Florida never have trusted President Clinton. The distrust turned to a feeling of betrayal last May when the United States reached an agreement with President Fidel Castro's government that allowed Cuban rafters to be returned to Cuba, rather than granting them automatic political asylum in the United States. Later last year, the Clinton administration announced a loosening of some travel and communications restrictions as well.

Frustrated by what many viewed as a softening of the traditional U.S. hard line toward Castro, several groups, including Brothers to the Rescue, embarked on a much more confrontational approach.

This included an incident July 13, when the exile community organized a flotilla that tried to penetrate Cuban waters but was turned back. Two days later, Castro warned that Cuban patience "can run out" with those who violate Cuban waters and airspace. In August, the Cubans deployed several anti-aircraft batteries along Havana's waterfront, and again warned that aircraft entering would be shot down.

Knowledgeable sources said that Castro ordered the Cuban military to make sure Cuban airspace and waters were not violated again.

On both Jan. 9 and Jan. 13, however, small airplanes flew over Havana, dropping anti-Castro leaflets, urging people to rise up against the government.

"The Cubans were absolutely livid, and the military was embarrassed,"

said Wayne Smith, who headed the U.S. Interests Section in Havana during the Carter administration and was in Havana during the January incidents. "The military promised Castro that they would not let this happen and it did. So the order went out to shoot them down. . . . And what had the U.S. government done to try to prevent those incursions? That group consistently filed false flight plans and no one lifted a finger."

Another Cuba analyst, who asked not to be identified, said the flights from Miami and the Cuban responses were "an incident waiting to happen. Neither side was going to back down. Both had given their word—one that the flights would continue, the other that the flights would be shot down. It was almost inevitable, because these two sides still see themselves at war."

Other analysts said there were other factors that helped create the environment for the downing of the airplanes.

Economic liberalization in Cuba was leading to an increasing debate within Castro's government over how far the changes should go, and how to keep them from spilling over into a political opening that could threaten the one-party Marxist state.

The most visible threat was the formation late last year of an umbrella group of the island's dissidents, known as Concilio Cubano. The group had requested permission to hold a public meeting last Saturday. In response, the government rounded

up several dozen members of the group last week and the meeting was canceled. Most were released after about 24 hours, but two were sentenced to long prison terms.

"The situation politically has gotten more delicate from the standpoint of the regime," said Andrew Zimbalist, an economics professor and Cuba specialist at Smith College. "Especially recent events with the Concilio, which represented the first civilian organization to promote unified opposition to the government."

The arrest of Concilio Cubano leaders and the cancellation of the meeting drew criticism across the U.S. political spectrum, from conservative Republicans to liberal Democrats and the White House.

A businessman who maintains regular, high-level contacts with Castro's government said the Cubans had recently decided that no matter what they did, a bill pending in Congress to tighten the U.S. economic embargo of Cuba would become law. Different versions of the bill, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), have been passed and now are in conference committee.

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