

Cuba Admits Ship Capture

SF Examiner

Examiner News Services

MIAMI — Premier Fidel Castro's government admitted in a Cuban radio broadcast today that it captured a Miami-based cargo ship in the Bahamas and warned that its gunboats will "go any distance from our coast" to seize "pirate ships."

"The entire responsibility for this situation belongs to the government of the United States as principal author and inspiration of such acts of banditry," said the broadcast monitored in Miami.

The broadcast said the 1400-ton freighter Johnny Express, owned by Cuban exiles and flying the Panamanian flag, was captured about 120 miles from the eastern coast of Cuba yesterday. The Johnny Express had radioed she was being attacked by Cuban gunboats and many of her crewmen were wounded by machinegun fire.

"One of our Cuban naval units that stands guard against pirate ships that have harrassed our territory at the service of the CIA captured the ship Johnny Express when she refused to obey an order to heave to for boarding," the broadcast said.

The Cuban radio said the Johnny Express was being escorted to a port in Oriente Province.

Call for Help

Jose Villa, captain of the Johnny Express, had issued a dramatic call for help before his radio went dead. Villa, 55, a naturalized U.S. citizen living in Miami, said he and three other crewmen were badly wounded by gunfire.

"The deck is covered with

blood. I am dying, chico," Villa said in a final and desperate radio message received here.

"Tell the Coast Guard to come quickly. Tell them there are dead and wounded here."

The Johnny Express was the second ship owned by Bahama Lines of Miami — a firm operated by Cuban exiles — to be seized by Cuba in 10 days.

Sister Ship

The Johnny Express had a crew of 14, including two American citizens, according

to Bahama Lines. She is the sister ship of the Lyla Express, which was seized Dec. 5 and taken to Cuba.

U.S. Coast Guard spokesman Ron Wright said planes with medics were dispatched purely on a humanitarian mission in efforts to provide medical aid for the crew. The planes were unable to find the Johnny Express.

The spokesman added that the ship was not in U.S. waters when attacked so "our hands are tied."

The Johnny Express, like the Lyla Express, had been returning from Haiti.