

Cuba Returns Hijack Money; Move for Improved Ties Seen

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The Cuban government has returned nearly \$2 million taken from Southern Airways by hijackers in 1972. Sen. John J. Sparkman (D-Ala.) announced yesterday.

Displaying the Cubans' check—drawn on an account in Montreal—Sparkman told a Washington press conference it was "very solid evidence that the Cuban government is genuinely interested in pursuing a policy of improved relations with the United States."

Sparkman, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked the Ford administration to respond in kind by immediately lifting all trade restrictions with Cuba on food, and medicines, and eventually on other commodities. "It is our turn to act," Sparkman said.

The Organization of American States voted last month to allow member states to lift the trade embargo against Cuba, but the United States has indicated that it is in no hurry to do so.

The administration wants to negotiate renewed trade relations in conjunction with other issues, including the claims of American firms and individuals against the Cuban government for property seized after Premier Fidel Castro took power.

Castro's decision to return the \$2 million appeared to be another in a series of gestures intended to demonstrate his desire to improve Cuban-American relations.

The money was ransom exacted in one of the wildest hijackings of the early 1970s. Three men took control of a Southern Airways DC-9 on a flight from Birmingham, Ala., to Montgomery, then took it on a flight across the United States and Canada, threatening to "bomb" the Oak Ridge, Tenn., nuclear energy facility if their demands for ransom were not met.

They forced the plane to land in nine cities. In Orlando, Fla., FBI agents shot out four of the jetliner's tires, which made its subsequent takeoff and landing in Havana extremely dangerous. In retaliation the hijackers shot the plane's co-pilot in the arm.

The hijackers were two Detroit men accused of assault and rape and an escaped convict from Tennessee. They were arrested on arrival in Cuba and are serving long jail terms there.

Castro apparently decided to return the money, which Cuban authorities took when the plane landed in Havana, in



FRANK HULSE
... receives money

April, and the Cuban leader wrote back May 30 agreeing to return the money.

Hulse and other Southern Airways officials received word Friday night that the Cubans were ready to hand over the money in Havana. They flew to the Cuban capital Saturday to collect the check, and confirmed yesterday morning that the Royal Bank of Canada would honor it.

Cuba had once tried to repay the money with a check drawn on a New York bank account which holds Cuban funds from the era of dictator Fulgencio Batista. The United States has frozen that account, however, and the check could not be cashed.

Southern Airways, a regional carrier, had to borrow the \$2 million it gave the hijackers as ransom. Several hundred dollars of the money was lost during the disabled plane's chaotic landing in Havana three years ago.

response to a personal plea from Sparkman, who described himself yesterday as an old friend of Southern Airways' President Frank Hulse. Sparkman wrote to Castro in