

# Nixon Pledges to Seek Release Of Skipper of Ship Cuba Seized



Mr. Nixon consoles wife of José Villa, ship's captain

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By JAMES M. NAUGHTON DEC 17 1971

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KEY BISCAYNE, Fla., Dec. 16 — President Nixon pledged today that he would do what he could to seek the release of José Villa, the captain of a Miami-based freighter attacked by a Cuban gunboat and seized yesterday in the Bahamas.

The President met with Captain Villa's wife, Isabel, and three children for 10 minutes at the Florida White House. The family of the Cuban refugee, a naturalized United States citizen, had gone there to deliver a letter pleading for Mr. Nixon's intervention.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, said after the meeting that the administration deplored the Cuban attack as an "unconscionable act" and that the United States had asked the Swiss Embassy in Havana to demand the "immediate" release of Captain Villa.

Earlier, before the captain's family saw the President, Mr. Ziegler used milder terms to criticize the Cuban government and stressed that the 1,400-ton

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### Havana Radio Retorts

The Havana radio, in an official broadcast this morning, acknowledged that Cuba's naval forces had captured the freighter 11 days after seizing a sister ship, the Lyla Express, off the coast of Cuba. The broadcast contended that both vessels, owned by the Babun family headed by four brothers who are Cuban exiles, was involved in anti-Cuban activities.

The broadcast, calling the Johnny Express a "pirate ship," did not mention the United States Coast Guard reports that the gunboat had strafed the vessel yesterday afternoon and rammed her as she steamed off the coast of Little Inagua Island in the Bahamas. Captain Villa and members of the 15-man crew were reported wounded.

The Havana broadcast said that the Cuban Government would have "no compunction whatsoever," about attacking vessels "under any flag or camouflage" that the Castro Government believed were engaged in "counterrevolutionary" activities.

The White House declined to comment on the Cuban allegations.

The Coast Guard was alerted

to the attack on the ship at 1:15 P.M., yesterday when Captain Villa radioed the Miami offices of the Babuns' Bahama Lines with a request for help. The radio contact was interrupted at 2:40 P.M. after the ship's crew reported being fired upon and rammed by the smaller patrol boat.

### Questions About Search

Mr. Ziegler refused to respond to questions about why it had taken the Coast Guard until 6 P.M. to get a search plane to the scene of the attack, 550 miles southeast of Miami and fewer than 200 miles from the United States Navy base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The United States planes could not find the ship last night. The Cuban broadcast said the vessel had been boarded and taken to the northern coast of Oriente Province. Mr. Ziegler said that the United States had learned Captain Villa was in Cuba today.

The initial reaction of the President's press secretary was to deplore the attack as "a violation of international practice and the right of freedom of navigation." Mr. Ziegler emphasized that the Johnny Express, although based in Miami, was registered in Panama and thus "This is, of course, a matter for Panama" to deal with.

Mrs. Villa, accompanied by her daughters, Isabel, 21 years old, and Mary, 18, and her son, José, 14, went to the Florida White House around noon today to present the letter of appeal to Mr. Nixon's staff. Mr. Ziegler said that the President had invited the Villas to his office to indicate "his very deep personal concern for the captain."

Mr. Ziegler, in his second briefing to newsmen, said that the ship seizure was "an act that cannot be tolerated within the international community."

Asked what the United States would do if Cuban authorities did not release Mr. Villa, Mr. Ziegler said that the Administration expected "to receive a positive response from the Cuban Government."

Mrs. Villa told reporters after seeing the President that "he gave us a lot of hope."

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