

CASTRO'S SHOW TRIALS DO NOT MEAN AN END TO CUBA'S DRUG TRADE

Cuba is undergoing its most explosive political shake-up since Fidel Castro seized power 30 years ago. The Castro regime has executed four high-level military and intelligence officials, including Cuba's most highly decorated Army hero, Major General Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez, for drug trafficking, corruption, and "betraying the revolution." Castro, however, is not cracking down on official Cuban involvement in the drug trade as some members of the United States Congress contend. On the contrary, he is striking to eliminate possible rivals and reformers. All the while, Cuba's active role in assisting drug shipments to the United States continues. Castro appears to want to cover up his involvement in narcotics trafficking to lull the U.S. into easing its diplomatic and economic sanctions against Cuba.

Documented evidence of Cuba's role in drug trafficking dates back to the early 1960s. According to a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) intelligence report released in 1982, a meeting was held in Havana in 1961 between communist revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Moises Crespo of the Cuban Secret Police, and future Chilean socialist president Salvador Allende, to discuss creating a narcotics network to smuggle illegal drugs to the U.S. During 1982 U.S. congressional hearings on the "Castro Connection," it was revealed that Cuba continued to be heavily involved in facilitating drug trafficking between South America and the U.S. That year, four high-level Cuban government leaders — including Cuba's ambassador to Colombia, Fernando Ravelo Renedo, and Cuban Navy Vice Admiral Aldo Santamaria — were indicted by a U.S. federal grand jury in Miami on drug smuggling charges.

Assisting Terrorists. U.S. Senate hearings on narcotics trafficking in 1983 also found that Castro's support of the drug trade, mostly organized by the Colombia-based Medellin Cartel, was directly tied to his promotion of communist revolutionary activity in Latin America. Testimony revealed that Castro dealt with narcotics traffickers as part of a plan to assist communist guerrilla and terrorist groups, obtain hard currency to salvage Cuba's bankrupt economy, and finance its wars in Africa. During a recent U.S. Senate hearing, Jose Blandon, a Panamanian defector and former top aide to Panama's strongman, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, testified that he was present at a June 1984 meeting in Havana where Castro personally mediated a dispute between Medellin Cartel drug lords and Noriega. In a separate case earlier this year, U.S. investigators infiltrated and broke up a drug ring in Florida led by Cuban-born Reinaldo Ruiz and his son, Ruben. Tapes released by the Miami U.S. Attorney's Office show the two men bragging about high-ranking drug connections in Cuba who offered free passage for cocaine shipments smuggled through Cuba to the U.S. Ruiz states that Cuban MiG-23 jet fighters and Cuban navy vessels offered to escort drug-laden planes and boats through Cuban territory. According to the Ruiz, who pleaded guilty to 27 narcotics counts, "the money that was paid [in Cuba] is in the drawer of Fidel."

“Major Threat.” According to U.S. Customs Department officials, two Cuban MiG fighter planes held a U.S. Customs aircraft at bay on July 9 while a small plane dropped a load of cocaine to a waiting speedboat inside Cuban waters. U.S. authorities later seized the boat 20 miles south of Miami and discovered 1,600 pounds of cocaine worth \$10 million. Drug shipments continue at a steady pace through Cuba despite the Castro government’s alleged crackdown on narcotics trafficking. Such U.S. government authorities as the DEA and the Customs Service identify drug flights over Cuba as “the major threat to U.S. drug interdiction efforts in south Florida.”

Besides trying to deceive outside observers about Cuba’s intentions in the war on drugs, Castro most likely has another ulterior motive for his show trials. There are serious concerns within Castro’s inner circle that Cuban military officers returning from Africa and reformist factions within the Cuban armed forces could become potential rivals to Castro’s apparent successor, his hard-line brother Raul. General Ochoa and others around him often complained about Castro’s rigid style of communism and secretly pushed for economic and political reforms similar to those underway in other Soviet bloc countries. Castro is a strong critic of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika, vehemently opposing change in Cuba’s Stalinist system. By purging Cuban officials who may have reformist sympathies, Castro likely is trying to assure his brother’s succession.

Castro’s Ploy. Last week, in a speech before the Cuban Council of State, Castro proclaimed the need “to arrange a form of communication between the U.S. and Cuba in this common (anti-drug) battle.” Castro’s ploy already has had an impact on Congress. Representative Charles Rangel, the New York Democrat and Chairman of the House Select Committee on Narcotics, has accused those skeptical of Castro of “playing anti-communist politics” and of overlooking chances for cooperation in the fight against narcotics traffickers.

The Bush Administration and the Congress, however, should not be swayed by Castro’s attempts to use the drug connections of his political enemies as an excuse to purge them. Castro apparently wants to reopen the debate in Washington over improving U.S.-Cuban relations. At a time when financial resources are scarce for Castro, and Moscow is threatening to diminish its aid to his regime, Castro apparently wants to establish new ties with the U.S. in the hope of one day receiving Western financial assistance and access to the U.S. market.

Continuing U.S. Policy. This, however, is not the time to normalize relations with Cuba. Castro is not developing a more moderate political system, but rather a more ruthless police state. Washington, rather than opening up to the Cuban dictator, should continue to isolate him economically and diplomatically. At a time when much of the Soviet bloc is discarding failed communist policies in favor of reform, Cuba is still wedded to its Stalinist past.

The Bush Administration should continue to condemn Castro’s pro-drug and terrorism policies and seek support within such international forums as the Organization of American States and the United Nations for U.S. efforts to condemn Castro for drug trafficking and human rights abuses. Washington also should review and improve the 28-year-old economic embargo against Cuba and encourage U.S. allies to direct their trade from Cuba to friendly Caribbean countries.

Finally, the U.S. should gather more intelligence on Cuba’s drug activities to provide hard evidence to those willing to give Castro the benefit of the doubt. Only then, perhaps, will congressional advocates of closer ties with Castro see the Ochoa execution for what it was — a purge of a political rival and not a change of heart toward drug traffickers.

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