

Terrorist Cuban Exile Luis Posada Carriles Seeking Political Asylum in U.S.

Monday, May 9, 2005

A.L. Bardach Interviewed by Amy Goodman of Democracy Now

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A chief terrorist with long ties to US intelligence agencies is seeking asylum in the United States. The FBI has evidence linking him to an airline bombing that killed 73 people. We're talking about the notorious militant Cuban exile: Luis Posada Carriles. Today we speak with one of the few American reporters who has interviewed him and the president of the national assembly of Cuba, which is calling for his extradition to Venezuela.

[includes rush transcript]

A chief terrorist with long ties to US intelligence agencies is seeking asylum in the United States. The FBI has evidence linking him to an airline bombing that killed 73 (seventy three people). We're talking about the notorious militant Cuban exile: Luis Posada Carriles. Today we speak with one of the few reporters who has interviewed him and the president of the national assembly of Cuba.

Luis Posada Carriles is a 77-year-old former CIA operative who was trained by the U.S. Army at Fort Benning in Georgia. He has been trying to violently overthrow Fidel Castro's government for four decades. Three weeks ago he entered the United States after years of hiding in Central America and the Caribbean. Posada has been connected to the 1976 downing of a civilian airliner that killed 73 passengers - the first act of airline terrorism in the Western hemisphere. He has also been linked to a series of 1997 bombings of hotels, restaurants, and discotheques in Havana that killed an Italian tourist; as well as a plot to assassinate Castro five years ago. He has been jailed in Venezuela and Panama. He was last seen in Honduras. Earlier this month he was said to have slipped into Miami. His newly-retained attorney has now requested asylum for him. In response, Venezuela's Supreme Court ruled that the government should seek his extradition from the United States to face terrorism charges.

If Posada is still in the United States, the Bush administration has three choices: granting him asylum; jailing him for illegal entry; or granting Venezuela's extradition request.

State Department official Roger Noriega claimed the Bush administration didn't know for sure if Posada was in the United States. He said Cuban claims about Posada "may be a completely manufactured issue." At the same time Noriega said the U.S. is "not interested in granting him asylum."

The brother of the Italian tourist killed by a bomb in a Havana hotel in 1997 told the Miami Herald: "It's like a New York or New Jersey resident who lost a relative in the

September 11 attacks, and the mastermind of this terrorist act is living in Canada. Wouldn't they be upset at the Canadian government?"

Today we spend the hour on the case of Luis Posada Carriles. Later in the program we'll speak with the President of the Cuban National Assembly Ricardo Alarcon, but we first turn to the reporter who interviewed Posada for the *New York Times* in 1998 - Ann Louise Bardach. At the time, she didn't say where he was hiding out. It was Aruba. We reached her last night at her home in Santa Barbara where she is a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara. She is a columnist for online magazine Slate and the author of "Cuba Exile." She talked about what Posada admitted to her and why he chose to speak out.

- **Ann Louise Bardach**, journalist and author.

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: It seemed to me that his reason for contacting me and contacting *The New York Times* is he wanted publicity. He said he was frustrated by the fact that he had been involved with this operation, this bombing operation in Cuba as part of the anti-Castro struggle, and that Castro was covering it up. I'm just giving you a paraphrase of his feelings – was that Castro was covering it up and that what Posada and his cohorts wanted is they wanted to inflict real damage in the tourist industry. They needed publicity because they needed to stop tourism in Cuba, he said. They needed to stop investment; they didn't want to hurt anybody, but what could you do? You had to continue the anti-Castro struggle, and that meant doing these bombing operations, and he said that, you know, it was unfortunate about an Italian tourist being killed.

I can't recall his exact words but it was something to the effect about being -- sitting in the wrong place at the wrong time. And that was my impression of why he came to me and came to *The New York Times* was because he wanted the attention – he wanted attention to his life struggle to bring down Fidel Castro and to this campaign which, you know, I guess what was going on is they were causing significant damage to Cuban tourism and, of course, the Cuban government not wanting to deter tourists were kind of, you know, covering it up. And he wanted to uncover it. Because what's the point of doing this if people keep going there? And he was very concerned that tourism and foreign investment was going to prop up Castro artificially, and he had to be destroyed.

AMY GOODMAN: So you have Luis Posada admitting to involvement in the 1997 bombings of tourist hotels. What else did he admit to you?

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: He did not say that -- I asked him about the Cubana shoot-down. He did not say that – he said he did not do it. He said that a man named Mono Morales or Ricardo Morales who was known as Mono, which means, you know, monkey, did it. You know, very conveniently for him, Mono Morales is dead. He was a kind of controversial guy. He was an informer for the F.B.I., seemed to be – well, like Posada, Posada had many agendas. You know, we later saw through the C.I.A., F.B.I. files that Posada had been a C.I.A. asset for many years.

He was informing on all kinds of things. He was – in fact, he was even at one point, astonishingly enough, he was informing on Orlando Bosch, who was his partner, because Posada ran DISIP, which was an -- DISIP was Venezuelan intelligence, and he ran that for quite a while, and he ran anti-Communist guerrilla campaigns in Latin America. He told me he was very, very fierce in Latin America and that he had a lot of enemies in Venezuela because, you know, he would go into this kind of hand-to-hand combat with the guerrillas.

He was a ferocious warrior. I mean, that is the name of his book. And I would -- anybody who is interested in Luis Posada, I would say two things: Read his own book -- he has a biography he published called *Los Caminos Del Guerrero*, (*The Paths of the Warrior, The Way of the Warrior*, whatever you want to call it) -- and also Chapter Seven of my book, *Cuba Confidential*, if -- those are the -- in his book he talks a great deal about his career and is pretty candid and is candid about the support he had in Miami and everybody he thought was terrific and who helped him and everybody he thought was not. I mean, his basic opinion was, is that all communists are bad, and they have to go, and just this furious anti-Castro fever that he had.

AMY GOODMAN: Ann Louise Bardach, *The New York Times* has a piece today, “Case of Cuban Exile Could Test the U.S. Definition of Terrorist,” where they say the government of Venezuela wants to extradite and retry Posada for the Cuban airline bombing, that he was involved, (quote) “up to his eyeballs in planning the attack, according to Carter Cornick, a retired counterterrorism specialist for the F.B.I., who investigated Posada's role in that case. A newly declassified 1976 F.B.I. document places Mr. Posada, who had been a senior Venezuelan intelligence officer, at two meetings where the bombing was planned.” Your response to that information?

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: I think I saw the June 1976 document about him being in Santa Domingo, from memory, back in 1998. Actually it ties -- the one I think I recall that we got at *The New York Times* back then had to do with the Cubana shoot-down, where there was that big meeting in Santa Domingo, the DR, and that that was discussed. I'm not sure it's a new document. I think it has been declassified for some time.

But yes, I am aware of what they're referring to. I can only say that the information -- Posada denied blowing up the airliner, but I have never found an intelligence official whether in the F.B.I., the C.I.A., certainly the Cuban intelligence, Venezuelan intelligence, who did not believe that Posada and Bosch were involved. They're basically two guys who worked for their detective agency after he sort of got in trouble with the Venezuelan government, he started a private eye detective agency, and the two guys who planted the bombs on the plane, who were Venezuelan, worked for Posada and Bosch. And I have never -- and I even did an interview, which is cited in my book, with the former head of Latin American intelligence for us, and he just said to me, he said, look, there were no other suspects. But Posada and his lawyers will properly point out that eventually over time, over ten years, he won an acquittal here, an acquittal there.

Venezuelan justice is very peculiar. Same thing with Orlando Bosch. I mean, there are people who will tell you that you can get an acquittal in Caracas back then, you know, for around \$45. I'm not exactly sure, but Venezuelan justice is very peculiar,

labyrinthine, and it was very susceptible to what is called *mordidas*, and there was a tremendous crusade in Miami to free these guys. But again, he and his lawyers say they did not do it. I have never heard anyone else in the intelligence world who did not think, *au contraire*, that he did do it. What is interesting in the memos I saw back in 1998 was, I remember one where he's informing and sending tips to the C.I.A. throughout 1976, and I just remember one where he said that Orlando Bosch may be involved in blowing up a civilian airliner, I think he identified the country, leaving from Panama. And I thought that was astonishing. By the way all these memos are discussed in my book. Many of them are discussed in *The New York Times* series in June 1998.

AMY GOODMAN: That you wrote. In today's *New York Times* edition it says, "Bosch, a long-time ally of Posada's, presented a similar problem for the U.S. in 1989 that Posada does today, when the Justice Department moved to deport him despite resistance from Miami's Cuban Americans." The Justice Department called Bosch a terrorist unfettered by laws or human decency, threatening and inflicting violence without regard to the identity of his victims, in the words of Joe Whitley, then an associate U.S. Attorney General. Whitley added: "The U.S. cannot tolerate the inherent inhumanity of terrorism as a way of settling disputes. Appeasement of those who would use force will only breed more terrorists," he said. "We must look on terrorism as universal evil, even if it is directed toward those with whom we have no political sympathy." The first Bush administration overruled the deportation of Bosch in 1990; Bosch remained in Florida. Mr. Whitley, now General Counsel for the Department of Homeland Security, declined to comment on the Posada case. Your response to that, Ann Louise Bardach?

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: First of all, I would tell you that the climate is very different. I disagree with the way that's characterized. As I discuss in my book and many other stories I have written about Cuba and Miami, Orlando Bosch was celebrated. The climate is radically different between -- since 9/11. When Orlando Bosch arrived in Miami, he was celebrated. At that time a woman named Ileana Ros-Lehtinen was running for Congress. She would be the first Cuban American elected, which she was. Her campaign manager was a man named Jeb Bush; it was one of his first big political jobs. And one of the cornerstones of Ileana's Congressional run was "Free Orlando Bosch." Because when he arrived in the U.S. he had, you know, an outstanding parole violation, and he was arrested, and everybody in justice, in F.B.I., and C.I.A. wanted to kick him out of the country.

Well, at that time, Jeb Bush's father was Vice President of the United States and later president. So, there is an overlapping period in there through the whole Bosch period. And anyway, Bosch was given residency, and there actually was what they called "Orlando Bosch Day" in Miami. And there was a huge celebration in the Orange Bowl. That's not going on with Posada. Posada has slipped in. He hasn't shown his face. We don't know where he is. And this is the post-9/11 environment. And it is now very embarrassing. By the way, previous to 9/11, most Americans don't know this, but quite a few Cuban exile militants who have been convicted of murder have been released. I don't think the average person knows that the killers of -- who were convicted for the crime of the car bombing of Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffitt, a man named Suarez and another man named Paz, were both released from prison just weeks before 9/11, again at the intercession of Miami politicians and Jeb Bush, and they talked John Ashcroft into releasing them. I think that it was very embarrassing after 9/11. I mean,

these were -- both men were convicted of that crime. I believe, off the top of my head, that for the murder of those two people, one an American citizen, they spent seven years.

AMY GOODMAN: We are talking to Ann Louise Bardach, one of the few U.S. reporters to have conducted an extensive in person interview with Luis Posada. She did it in Aruba in 1998 for *The New York Times*. We will come back to continue speaking with her and then the number three man in Cuba, the President of the National Assembly, for his response.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: This is Democracy Now!, democracynow.org, the War and Peace Report. I am Amy Goodman, as we deal today spending the hour with a chief terrorist with long ties to the United States, seeking political asylum here. His name: Luis Posada Carriles. We are speaking to the reporter who is one of the few to have conducted an extensive in-person interview with Posada. She interviewed him in Aruba in 1998 for *The New York Times*. Again reading from today's *New York Times* front-page article, I asked Ann Louise Bardach last night to talk about this section, (quote), "Mr. Cornick, the F.B.I. counterterrorism specialist who worked on the Letelier case, said in an interview that both bombings were planned at a June 1976 meeting in Santa Domingo, attended by, among others, Mr. Posada. The Cubana bomb went off, the people were killed, and there were tracks leading right back to DISIP." This according to Mr. Cornick, who is now retired. He said, "The information was so strong that they locked up Posada as a preventive measure, to prevent him from talking or being killed. They knew that he had been involved," said Cornick, referring to the Venezuelan authorities. He went on to say, "There was no doubt in anyone's mind, including mine, that he was up to his eyeballs in the Cubana bombing." I asked Ann Louise Bardach to respond.

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: Well, in my book I quote from the memorandum where he talks about possible shoot downs of civilian airliners, he's acting as an informer to the C.I.A. before it happens. Of course, he doesn't say he is involved, he says -- what's interesting to me always regarding Posada is how he was informing on some of his compatriots and how they continue to defend him like, for instance, Orlando Bosch has recently defended him. But if you look at the memorandum, he was informing on Bosch. So I always found that interesting, and I guess the fabric or the ties of being in the anti-Castro movement sort of, you know, transcend everything. And by the way, you know, there is a lot to be said about wanting to remove Fidel Castro that is very reasonable about a man who hasn't stood for an election for some 40-something years. I just think most people don't think this was the way to go about it. And at the end of the day, you know, I think it has been very damaging, and it hasn't helped, you know, the Cuban cause. And at the end of the day, Fidel Castro is in power, and Luis Posada is looking for a new place to live.

AMY GOODMAN: Ann Louise Bardach, what about these rumors that he might have already left, but also other people who are prominent figures today in this country, for example, John Bolton, the embattled nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations?

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: I spoke to somebody pretty prominent in the Cuban exile

political firmament yesterday, the day before yesterday, Rafael Diaz-Balart, one of the patriarchs of the Cuban exile political world, the father of Lincoln and Mario, who are both Congressmen from Miami, passed away, and also Rafael Diaz-Balart, for those who don't know, was once the best friend of Fidel Castro, introduced his sister to Fidel Castro. And a lot of people don't realize that the Diaz-Balarts and the Castro are bound, you know, by marriage, bound by relatives. I mean, you know, that they have blood ties with children and cousins and nephews, and all that kind of thing, which is very interesting, which is Chapter Two of my book, the blood ties between these sworn enemies. But this man called me to talk about Rafael's death and what it meant for Cuban-exile Washington politics, and I mentioned to him, because he is fairly high up, I said, well, where is Posada now? And he said that he thinks that he may have slipped out, that he could read the tea leaves and could see that -- they had thought, he said, that Posada would slip in.

He did so much good deeds, in his mind, for Iran-Contra that he felt that the U.S. government owed him. He thought because these other fellows, Suarez and Paz, who went to prison over the Letelier/Moffitt case, you know, have had a very nice reinvented life in Miami, that he too would, and Bosh has had a pretty nice life, as well. And that they thought they were going to slip under the radar, but after I wrote my piece in *The Washington Post* and now other people, it has been a slow percolation, and Michael Isikoff wrote about it in *Newsweek*, that it was going to get a lot worse and that Homeland Security was actually taking this quite seriously.

You know, look, this is a big embarrassment, as Luis Posada told me in the interview, you know, he told me he was not an American citizen, he was Venezuelan citizen, and he said he had all these passports that were bogus passports and bogus names, including an American one, which got him into an embassy in Sierra Leone. And he tells a very funny story back in 1998 in *The New York Times* series. So basically, a man slips into the borders with a bogus passport and a bogus name and then asks for asylum. It is embarrassing for Homeland Security. It is embarrassing to the I.N.S. and I do know this, that there is a lot of dissension over this issue.

There's hard-liners who just feel that the administration must go to bat for Posada. He was a key player in Iran-Contra. He worked for Iran-Contra with Felix Rodriguez, he really ran the whole field operation. People forget that Luis Posada was Eugene Hasenfus's translator. He was almost in that airplane that went down that brought Eugene Hasenfus. As Posada told me, you know, when everything hit the fan on Iran-Contra, it was him who ran through wherever they were, their safe houses and cleared out American military personnel. He said he destroyed documents. In other words, he said, "I saved a lot of embarrassment and scandal." And I asked him, "Well, who knew?" I said, "Did the Vice President know? Did the President know about what was going on?" And he said, "Everyone."

AMY GOODMAN: And you're talking, Vice President then was George H. W. Bush, President Reagan?

ANN LOUISE BARDACH: That's correct. That's what he said, and he says that in my -- in *The New York Times* series, and he says it in my book. It is the same information. And he laughs about -- and he says everyone knew. So when Posada first appeared in Miami, I called another prominent Miami politician who is very wired and feels very

strongly and very supportive of Posada, and I said, “What’s going to happen?” This was on the very first day. And he said, he’s going to stay. I said, well, how could that be with his -- with all the outstanding -- you know, fugitive warrants and everything else? And then he said, he knows too much. And he said, they owe him. And that was the feeling very strongly. Now what I heard from another Miami politician, as I said, the day before yesterday was he thinks that things were going so badly in this last week that they just told Posada, get out of here. Go back to Caracas, go back to El Salvador, probably Salvador, that's really where his main base was.

AMY GOODMAN: Ann Louise Bardach, one of the few U.S. reporters ever to have conducted an in-person extensive interview with Luis Posada Carriles. She now writes for *Slate*, the on-line magazine, and is a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She did the interview in 1998 for *The New York Times*.

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