

Experts debate taking Cuba off terrorism list

By Maya Bell /Miami Bureau
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MIAMI -- Four months before terrorists turned the World Trade Center into a mass grave, Cuban President Fidel Castro offered a grim picture of the future while touring three countries that, like his own, are on the U.S. State Department's list of terrorist nations.

"Iran and Cuba, in cooperation with each other, can bring America to its knees," Castro said at the University of Tehran. "The U.S. regime is very weak, and we are witnessing this weakness from close up."

In a post-Sept. 11 world, Castro foes have repeatedly cited those words, reported by the Agence France-Presse on May 10, 2001, as yet another reason to retain Cuba's 20-year-old designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Despite the aging dictator's inflammatory rhetoric, however, there is growing consensus among foreign-policy experts that Cuba's appearance on the list, alongside Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, North Korea and Sudan, is a Cold War relic counter to U.S. interests.

"It's undeniable that Cuba promoted revolution in Latin America and supported communist insurgents in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but it sticks out like sore thumb on the terrorist list today," said Philip Peter, a State Department official during the Reagan and first Bush administrations.

Few critics, though, have any illusion the State Department will minimize Cuba's status as a rogue nation when it issues its annual report on Global Patterns of Terrorism, due out next month. They contend that Cuba remains on the list

only for political reasons. With Florida such an important swing state, they say President Bush, like the presidents before him, can ill afford to alienate hard-liners in Miami's politically potent exile community by minimizing Cuba's threat.

"Frankly, I don't know anyone in or outside of government who believes in private that Cuba belongs on the terrorist list," said Richard Nuccio, President Clinton's adviser on Cuba. "People who defend it know it is a political calculation. It keeps a certain part of the voting public in Florida happy, and it doesn't cost anything."

A State Department spokesman indicated such assertions are nonsense. So did Florida's senior senator, Bob Graham, who, as chair of the Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, is regularly briefed on Cuba. He said Cuba is still providing assistance, particularly medical assistance, to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, and is the Latin American headquarters for the Irish Republican Army.

"All that is on top of a long history of active promotion of instability in the region," Graham said.

The State Department first designated Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1982 when, as a satellite of the Soviet Union, the island was training and arming Latin American and African revolutionaries. With its Soviet sponsor and subsidies long gone, it remains on the list, the State Department says, for harboring a number of Basque terrorists and several U.S. fugitives and for allowing Colombia's two largest guerrilla groups to maintain "a permanent presence" on the island.

The drumbeat to knock Cuba off the list began just two weeks after Middle Eastern hijackers slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Wayne Smith, the top U.S. diplomat in Havana under President Carter, joined 17 other individuals in assailing the rationale for keeping it there. The United States "can no longer afford to confuse and divert our struggle against real terrorist threats because of domestic political considerations," they wrote.

Now a senior fellow with the Center for International Policy, Smith concedes that members of Spain's Basque separatist group, known as ETA, live on the island. But he notes they are there under an agreement between Castro and former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, whose successor has not requested their extradition.

Likewise, he acknowledges that a number of fugitives from U.S. justice, including a member of Los Macheteros, Puerto Rico's terrorist independence group responsible for the 1975 bombing in New York that killed four, live in Cuba. But he argues they cannot be returned because the United States and Cuba have not had an operative extradition treaty since Castro's revolution triumphed in 1959.

Smith also expresses dismay that Cuba is criticized for its contacts with FARC and the ELN, or National Liberation Army. Noting that Cuba hosted peace talks between the Colombian government and the rebels, he said Cuba is a recognized, legitimate player in the peace process.

Several other Cuba analysts have since weighed in with similar reasoning, with the Foreign Relations Council, a nonprofit think tank, summing up the prevailing sentiment in its online terrorism encyclopedia. In examining each of the state sponsors of terrorism, its entry for Cuba is the only one laden with heavy skepticism.

"[I]ntelligence experts have been hard pressed to find evidence that Cuba currently provides weapons or military

training to terrorists groups," it states. "In 1998, a comprehensive review by the U.S. intelligence community concluded that Cuba does not pose a threat to U.S. national security, which implies that Cuba no longer sponsors terrorism."

But that opinion is by no means universal. Dennis Hays, who preceded Nuccio as coordinator for Cuban affairs under Clinton, shoots back with his own skepticism. Now executive vice president of the Cuban American National Foundation, the most powerful anti-Castro lobby, Hays says the 1998 intelligence report is deeply flawed because of the senior Cuba analyst who had a hand in it: Ana Belen Montes.

A U.S. citizen of Puerto Rican descent, Montes, 45, is the highest-ranking Cuba spy ever caught. Arrested 10 days after Sept. 11, she pleaded guilty last month to one count of espionage, admitting she had passed top-secret information to Cuba during her years with the Defense Intelligence Agency.

While acknowledging that the reasons for keeping Cuba on the list are weak, Hays said the language had been "watered down" by a Clinton administration eager to expand relations with Cuba. He predicted that the upcoming report would make a far more persuasive case for maintaining Cuba's rogue status.

Cuba-watchers agree, given President Bush's recent appointment of Otto Reich as his top diplomat for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Reich, a staunch anti-Castro Cuban native appointed over Senate objections, has made it clear he opposes softening U.S. policy on Cuba.

Hays, who was delighted with Reich's appointment, said the State Department has a wealth of evidence detailing Cuba's "unrepentant and continuing" sponsorship of international

terrorism, much of which should have been included in previous terrorism reports.

He cited, for example, the 1996 incident in which Cuban fighter jets shot down two Cessna aircraft carrying members of the exile organization Brothers to the Rescue. All four men aboard, three of them American citizens, were killed. Cuba defended the action, saying the planes violated its airspace.

Hays also noted that the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Adm. Tom Watson, recently told congressional investigators that Cuba has the potential to use "information warfare" to disrupt U.S. access or flow of forces to the region.

But not least of all, Hays said, the United States cannot ignore Castro's May 2001 visit to Iran, Iraq and Libya, or the regime's ongoing terrorism against its own people. As Human Rights Watch has reported, Cuba has a "highly effective machinery of repression."

In Havana, where billboards of a finger-wagging Castro condemn both terrorism and the Afghanistan war, government officials said they don't lose sleep over Cuba's designation.

Rafael Dausa, head of the North American division for Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Relations, said it serves to underscore how alone the U.S. stands.

"We have good relations with 172 countries," Dausa said. "No one can seriously believe the U.S. is serious about the list if we are on it."

Indeed, British Energy Minister Brian Wilson, visiting Cuba a month after the Sept. 11 attacks, said, "We are not in

agreement with the U.S. view that Cuba sponsors terrorism." And an embassy spokesman for neighboring Canada, which has condemned Cuba for violating human rights, says Canada is "pleased" Cuba signed all United Nations instruments related to the fight against terrorism.

But nothing, Dausa said, proves how flawed the list is more than the United States' own double standard. For years, he said, the United States has harbored exiles committed to terrorizing the island. As an example, he pointed to Orlando Bosch, a pediatrician accused of masterminding the 1976 bombing of a Cuban jetliner, originating in Venezuela, that killed 73 people. After spending 11 years in Venezuelan prisons, Bosch was paroled to his family home in Miami, where he was embraced as a hero.

"Perhaps if we made a list, the U.S. would be on it," Dausa said.

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