

MIAMI FBI speaks to pardoned Cuban exiles

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The FBI interrogated three of four Cuban exiles pardoned in Panama after being convicted of plotting to kill Fidel Castro. The fourth man's whereabouts remain a mystery.

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FBI agents questioned three Cuban exiles shortly after they arrived at Opa-locka Airport following their pardon by Panama's president in an alleged plot to kill Fidel Castro.

The information could be used for an investigation into whether the three -- all naturalized U.S. citizens -- violated federal law. The U.S. Neutrality Act bars Americans from trying to overthrow foreign governments not at war with this country.

On Thursday, FBI agents interrogated the three to find out more about the Castro claim that they planned to kill him during a 2000 visit to Panama, according to law enforcement sources. Immigration officials also questioned them.

Meanwhile, the mystery of the whereabouts of a fourth exile and alleged plot mastermind, Luis Posada Carriles, continued Friday with reports that he was in El Salvador or Honduras.

A Miami developer helped arrange for Posada's flight to an undisclosed country and for the charter Lear jet that brought the three men home to Miami. Santiago Álvarez confirmed

Friday that the three were interviewed by the FBI at the airport.

"Everybody who comes into this country has conversations with federal officials as they come in," he said. "The FBI interrogated them also."

FBI spokeswoman Judy Orihuela and U.S. attorney's spokesman Carlos B. Castillo declined to comment.

KEEPING LOW PROFILES

Alvárez said he did not know what the conversations between the FBI and the exiles were about. Asked whether the men had legal counsel at the time, he said: "Why do they need lawyers if they haven't committed any crimes in this country?"

He also said the three decided not to make any public appearances or press interviews for the next few days: "They have retired to the bosom of their homes to spend time with their families."

Gaspar Jiménez, Pedro Remón and Guillermo Novo flew home to Miami aboard the jet chartered by Alvárez, who spearheaded a campaign that raised about \$400,000 for their legal defense in Panama.

The four men were arrested in Panama in 2000 when Castro went there for an Ibero-American Summit. Castro claimed that the group was there to attempt to kill him.

The four said they were in Panama to assist a Cuban army general who planned to defect during the Castro visit.

Panama's courts ruled there was insufficient evidence to charge them with attempted murder or possession of explosives. But in April they were sentenced to up to eight

years in prison after being convicted of endangering public safety.

Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso Moscoso pardoned the men Wednesday, less than a week before she is to leave office. She told The Herald she did so for "humanitarian reasons" and because she feared that her successor would extradite the men to Cuba, where they could face a firing squad.

SEPARATE DEPARTURE

Since the release of the four, there has been no confirmation on the whereabouts of Posada, a CIA-trained explosives expert with a long history of anti-Castro violence, including a dozen terror bombings of Havana tourist spots in 1997.

Unlike the other three men, Posada is not a U.S. citizen and is believed not to have lived in this country since the early 1960s.

One top Panamanian government official hinted to The Herald that Posada left Panama for the Dominican Republic aboard a separate plane. A Panamanian pilot said the plane, which he described as Panama-registered, filed a flight plan to El Salvador.

But Ramón Romero, director of Honduras' immigration agency, was quoted by the Spanish news agency EFE Friday as saying that Posada was aboard the same airplane as the other three when it made a stopover Thursday in the northern city of San Pedro Zula.

Honduran authorities are investigating whether Posada remained in the country when the jet took off for Miami with the other three exiles, Romero told EFE.

Alvrez confirmed to The Herald that he chartered two planes, one for Posada and another the other three men.

The confusion over Posada clearly pleased Alvrez, who said in a phone interview Friday that Posada's current location is being kept secret because of fears of assassination attempts by Cuban agents.

"Yesterday, they were certain that he was in El Salvador. I heard that he was in the Dominican Republic, too. The more places they say the better, because the more confused they are going to be," Alvrez said.

He declined comment on whether the jet that brought home the three Miami Cubans had made a stopover in Honduras. The Coral Gables company that owns the chartered jet could not be reached for comment.

Several leftist groups in Panama and around Latin America charged Friday that the U.S. government had pushed Moscoso to approve the pardon -- a charge heatedly denied by a a half-dozen U.S. and Panamanian officials.

"The United States had absolutely nothing to do with this at any moment," Panamanian Foreign Minister Harmodio Arias told The Herald.

Said State Department spokesman Adam Ereli: ``We never lobbied the Panamanian government to pardon anyone involved in this case."

Herald staff writer Juan O. Tamayo and Nancy San Martin contributed to this report.