

Righteous Bombers?

Miami's non-Muslim mullahs are ready to forgive Castro's
accused 2000 assassins By Kirk Nielsen

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What would happen at this stage of our war on terrorism if a group of clerics, claiming to represent all members of their ethnic community, publicly appealed for the freedom of suspects jailed for attempting to blow up the head of an evil empire? They would be blasted to the Stone Age by state-of-the-art military aircraft, right? What if these spiritual leaders, however, were not in league with al Qaeda, not based in Tora Bora, but lived and preached right here in greater Miami? FBI agents and CIA operatives would swarm around them for questioning, right? Probably, unless they were the twenty Cubans in the Spiritual Guides in Exile Working Group (Grupo de Trabajo de Guías Espirituales en Exilio). The group is an ecumenical body composed of nineteen men and one woman who represent the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist, and Roman Catholic faiths, including Auxiliary Bishop Agustin Roman of the Archdiocese of Miami.

(For list see below)

Earlier this year the Guides quietly beseeched the president of Panama to pardon four men who are imprisoned and awaiting trial in that country. The four suspects -- Luis Posada Carriles, Pedro Remón, Guillermo Novo, and Gaspar Jimenez -- are charged with plotting to plant C-4 plastic explosives in a public place in Panama City in December 2000. According to the indictment, the plan

called for detonation as a particular evil emperor named Fidel Castro approached. Castro was in Panama attending the Ibero-American Summit at the time. As most people know, C-4, the missile of choice for Palestinian suicide bombers and the al Qaeda operatives who pulled off the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, is not a precision tool. Barring a miracle, such an explosion would have mangled many civilians besides the bearded El Comandante en Jefe. The trial is scheduled to start December 5.

The Spiritual Guides sent their appeal in a letter to Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso. Disregarding the judicial process, the Guides proclaimed the defendants' innocence. "The four are victims of a well-orchestrated stratagem by the Castro regime to avoid the diplomatic censure that he was inevitably going to suffer at the Ibero-American Summit," they wrote in Spanish. "These four men embody the desperate and persistent efforts of the Cuban diaspora to liberate themselves from a despotic tyranny that has spent more than four decades oppressing the Cuban people." In a word, heroes. The Guides' letter also summarized the alibi Posada, et al. first put forth last year: They were in Panama only to help the chief of the Cuban government's intelligence agency defect. (See "Fidel Made Them Do It," New Times, August 9, 2001).

Only twelve Guides signed the letter but, according to Bishop Roman, all twenty collectively wrote it during one of their monthly meetings at San Juan Bosco Catholic Church on West Flagler Street in Little Havana.

The four embodiments of exile heroism have the following criminal histories, according to U.S. law enforcement records:

Luis Posada Carriles, age 74. Imprisoned in Venezuela along with Orlando Bosch, on charges they organized the bombing of a Cubana de Aviación jet in 1976 that killed 73 people, including members of Cuba's national fencing team. Escaped in 1985 and joined anti-Communist CIA operations in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Took credit for planning six bombings at Havana hotels and restaurants during 1997 that killed one person and injured eleven.
(Venezuelan authorities released Bosch in 1988 and he returned to Miami.)

Pedro Remón, 57. Identified by fellow Omega 7 member Eduardo Arocena as triggerman in murders of pro-Castro activist Eulalio José Negrin in 1979 and Cuban diplomat Felix Garcia Rodriguez in 1980. Also bombed Cuban consulate in Montreal that year. Arrested in Miami in 1982. In 1986 pleaded guilty to failed 1980 bombing attempt aimed at Cuba's U.N. ambassador. Sentenced for criminal contempt in Arocena's murder and bombing trial. (Arocena is serving a life sentence.)

Guillermo Novo, 68. As member of the Cuban National Movement, fired bazooka at (and missed) United Nations headquarters in 1964 while Che Guevara was speaking. Convicted in the 1976 Washington, D.C., car bombing that killed Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffet. Acquitted on appeal, but served four years for lying to a grand jury investigating that crime.

Gaspar Jimenez, 66. In 1977 helped kidnap Cuba's consul to Mexico, killing a consular official. Escaped from a Merida jail in 1977. Arrested in Miami and deported to Mexico in 1981. After sentence reduction was deported back to Miami in 1983. That year the U.S. Attorney in Miami dropped sealed grand jury indictment containing witness account that Jimenez was responsible for explosion of bomb attached to car of radio journalist Emilio Milian, destroying

the latter's legs. (Milian survived and continued to speak out against intolerant exiles. He died last year at age 69.)

When Milian's widow, Emma Mirta Milian, read an October 21 story about the appeal letter in El Nuevo Herald she became very upset. A devout Catholic, she met with several of the Spiritual Guides, including Bishop Roman. She brought him a stack of old Miami Herald articles documenting the criminal pasts of the four men. Several of the articles recapped police and FBI investigations from the late Seventies and early Eighties that led to the Jimenez indictment. "I told him I was very disgusted because they were supporting a pardon for four assassins, four terrorists," she recounted. "I said, 'Padre, how could you ask for a pardon for four terrorists?'" Roman, she continued, told her the pardon followed a request by the wives and other relatives of the four accused. "I was able to get very few words from his mouth," she lamented.

Emma Mirta was unable to get any at all from Archbishop John Favalora. She and her 39-year-old daughter Mirtha had to settle for an audience with Favalora's assistant, Msgr. Michael Souckar. Mirtha says Father Souckar told her the Archdiocese had been "inundated" with complaints about the letter, but he offered no action. "He said the Spiritual Guides have a constitutional right to express their opinion," Mirtha reported.

"That's pretty funny," her brother Al Milian remarked bitterly, noting the Catholic Church's history of censoring members for contrary views on abortion rights and other controversial matters. "It's so nice to hear them condone free speech and dissent within the Church now." Milian, a lawyer for the Police Benevolent Association, thinks the bishops have a lot of explaining to do. "The Church should not get involved in defending these elements." Archbishop Favalora did not respond to a request for comment.

Defending himself, Bishop Roman told New Times that a visit by Guillermo Novo's wife Miriam had inspired his decision to appeal for a pardon. But the most important factor, he said, were letters from the four prisoners. "The letters said that it was a trap that the [Cuban] government had set up and all that," the placid 74-year-old priest summarized, slowly and serenely during an interview at the bayside Ermita de la Caridad Church (Our Lady of Charity) in Coconut Grove. "And I believe that it happened to them that way. With all sincerity we know the government of Cuba is one to make a show." He was sure they were on a peaceful mission. "Their letters showed that they were looking for a solution that wasn't violent. If they had been asking for a violent solution then we never could have written," he added. "We never, as ministers of the gospel, could accept any violent act, terrorism, against Castro or anyone." Roman was willing to accept the possibility that the four men had once engaged in the evils of violence. But ever ready to apply what he calls the "law of mercy," Roman said: "What we would have to see is what they thought before and what they think now."

Still, despite having issued the appeal for a pardon six months before the trial, he insisted that any pardon would have to come after the judicial process. "They have to go through a trial," he said. "Justice has to be first." Indeed that was the message he had received from President Moscoso, via Minister of the Presidency Ivonne Young. "The principle of separation of powers prevents the executive branch from intervening in the essence of [the courts'] decisions," she explained in a letter to Roman this past July.

Then why, the Milians wonder, ask for a pardon at all? "Basically he wants them freed regardless of what they've done," Mirtha observed, angrily. "That's ridiculous. I don't know how they reconcile themselves." Worse, she added, the Spiritual Guides are using their moral authority to

deceive the exile community. "When you call someone a patriot who's a murderer, you're fooling people. I understand that they're against capital punishment, but don't interfere with justice."

"'Spiritual Guides' -- that's laughable," Emma Mirta chided. "Fidel Castro must be dying of laughter." She scoffs at Bishop Roman's notion that perhaps Jimenez, Novo, Remón, and Posada have renounced violence. "Well, then let them resurrect the dead people that they've killed."

Bishop Roman's law of mercy -- let alone Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical letter revealing that true peace can only be achieved through nonviolent struggle -- still hasn't pacified some of el exilio's most persistent advocates of violence, including Bosch. Two decades ago, Roman held a mass for him, while Bosch was on a hunger strike in a Caracas prison. "Lord, let there be justice in the case of Orlando Bosch, and for all who are imprisoned unjustly," the Miami Herald quoted him as saying. Last year Bosch told New Times that none of the victims of the Cubana de Aviación bombing were innocent. "They were all esbirros [collaborators]," he grumbled. But he again denied involvement in the crime. Three weeks ago (November 15) Bosch delivered a speech at an event in which he called the Varela Project, a plan for a peaceful transition to electoral democracy in Cuba, "stupid." (Roman supports the project.) Bosch was among the orators honoring the four imprisoned heroes. The event was held at the Casa del Preso, a one-story house on SW Thirteenth Avenue near SW Twelfth Street, which is the headquarters of an organization of ex-political prisoners. Among the one hundred people who listened were the wives of the four men in Panama. Bosch also vowed to "never relinquish other means of struggle" and noted that some people don't understand the difference between "terrorism" and "direct action." (Last year in a conversation with New Times he asserted there was no

distinction, saying armed conflict was terrorism. He added: "At times you cannot avoid hurting innocent people.")

The most magnetic speaker of the evening, however, was José Dionisio Suarez. A former Cuban National Movement member along with Novo, Suarez was arrested in 1990 for conspiring to kill Chilean ambassador Letelier and, after pleading guilty, was sentenced to twelve years in prison. He was released last year.

"This is a very special night," Suarez began, noting that the Casa del Preso was like "a temple." "We are here to honor four Cubans who have never surrendered," he declared. "These Cubans ... are imprisoned arbitrarily, and I say arbitrarily because there is not evidence that proves the charges against them. They are prisoners of the terror of the Latin American presidents who consent to the destabilizing partisanship of the Castrista tyranny.

"We know that they are innocent," he continued. "But if, remotely, at one moment they thought about physically eliminating the animal that hasn't only destroyed our country economically but also morally ... they deserve respect, they deserve applause." The audience clapped. "Cubans have all the right to do what is necessary to eliminate not only this animal but also all of the animals that surround him!" The convicted killer wanted to be brief, he assured, but had one parting thought. "I just want to repeat that if at any moment in the minds of these four Cubans there was the idea of assassinating Castro, then welcome to that idea!" And the crowd applauded and cheered enthusiastically.

Spiritual Guides in Exile Working Group
(Grupo de Trabajo de Guías Espirituales en Exilio)

Rev. Martín N. Añorga Rev. Alberto Cutié Rev. Rolando
Espinosa Rev. Aída M. Diego Rev. Leopoldo Frade Rev.

Lenier Gallardo Rev. Jacobo Gueribeten Rev. Emilio
Hernández Rev. Santiago Mateo Rev. Daniel Medina Rev.
José Luis Menéndez Rev. Luis Pérez Rev. Marcos A.
Ramos Rev. Guillermo A. Revuelta Rev. Francisco
Rodríguez Rev. Francisco Santana Rev. Manuel Salabarría
Rev. Agustín A. Román Rev. Emilio Vallina Rev. Evelio
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