

Tape suggests Raúl Castro ordered Brothers shutdown

A recording purportedly of Raúl Castro suggests he gave direct orders for the shutdown of Brothers to the Rescue planes.

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Cuban Defense Minister Raúl Castro discussed plans for the 1996 shutdowns of two Brothers to the Rescue airplanes during a meeting with official journalists just weeks after the event, according to an audio tape obtained by El Nuevo Herald.

In the tape, a voice identified as Raúl's details the planning carried out during a meeting of military officers around Jan. 13, 1996, the day Brothers aircraft allegedly had overflown Havana to drop anti-government leaflets.

"I made it clear that [the decision to shoot] had to be decentralized if we wanted it to be effective, so we gave the power to five generals," the voice says. The Brothers airplanes ``were going to escalate this, and we had no other recourse but to make this decision.

"I told them [MiG pilots] to try to knock them down over [Cuban] territory, but they [the Brothers aircraft] would enter Havana and go away . . . Of course, with one of those missiles, air-to-air, what comes down is a ball of fire that will fall on the city," the voice says. ``Well, knock them down into the sea when they reappear. If not, consult with the people in authority."

The two Brothers Cessna C-337 were shot down by MiGs Feb. 24, killing Armando Alejandro, Carlos Costa, Mario de la Peña and Pablo Morales. Brothers to the Rescue has denied any violations of Cuban airspace.

The 11-minute recording was taped during a June 21, 1996, conversation at a Cuban Communist Party office in the eastern city of Holguín between Castro, government officials and journalists from the government's Radio Rebelde network.

The authenticity of the recording could not be independently confirmed. A telephone call Sunday to the Cuban diplomatic mission in Washington went unanswered.

RECORDING'S SOURCE

The recording was obtained by a Havana journalist who requested anonymity for his own security. Cubans in Miami who listened to it say they believe it is indeed Raúl's voice. The Holguín newspaper carried a report on Raúl's presence there the day after the meeting. The recording was delivered to El Nuevo Herald through Nueva Prensa Cubana, a Miami agency that represents several dissident journalists in Cuba.

On two occasions, the voice on the recording is heard warning the government journalists to ``publish nothing about this."

Cuban leader Fidel Castro told CBS News anchor Dan Rather in April of 1996 that he had given general orders that violations of Cuban airspace should be stopped, but that neither he nor Raúl had given the specific order for the Feb. 24 shutdown.

Fidel Castro temporarily ceded power to his younger brother three weeks ago after undergoing "complicated" intestinal surgery. He is reported to be recovering but has not been seen in public since although photos and a video have been released.

Cuba has long maintained that the Brothers' Cessna 337 planes were shot down within its territorial waters. But an investigation by the United Nations' International Civil Aviation Organization concluded they were well outside Cuban waters.

The tape does not specify the names of the five generals empowered to order the shootdowns. In August 2003, federal prosecutors in Miami indicted three Cuban officers for the attacks: Gen. Rubén Martínez Puente, then head of the anti-aircraft command, and MiG pilot-brothers Alberto Lorenzo and Francisco Pérez Pérez.

ON FULL ALERT

In the recording, the voice says that Cuban military forces were put on full alert after Brothers airplanes allegedly violated Cuban airspace on July 13, 1995.

'One MiG-23 got behind them . . . 'I have him, I have him,' he said. 'Let him go,' he was ordered," says the voice, adding later that the order to stop the incursions remained in force as of the Holguín meeting. "The order stays."

In the tape, the voice also says that just before the Holguín meeting the speaker ordered the emergency landing of a plane carrying Fidel Castro from central Cuba to Havana because air force radars had detected "several" suspicious marks in Havana province.

"I ordered that the plane land in Varadero," the voice says. 'It was necessary to say that the order was mine. 'Make it land in Varadero!' and [Fidel] told them to obey it."

José Basulto, president of Brothers to the Rescue, and relatives of the dead pilots have long insisted on bringing Raúl Castro before U.S. justice for the shootdowns.

"This is the type of proof we have been seeking from day one as confirmation that the murder was premeditated," said Maggie Alejandre Khuly, sister of pilot Armando Alejandre.

Basulto, who was in another plane during the attacks, said the tape "points to Raúl Castro as the direct source of the decision to down the airplanes . . . This is a record of the plans for the crime."