

Exile seeks return of \$1.5M he says was for anti-Castro plot

A Cuban exile is trying to recover from several Cuban American National Foundation members \$1.5 million he says he loaned to finance a possible overthrow of Fidel Castro.

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José Antonio Llama spends much of his retirement stewing in his art-filled Miami home about one incomplete mission: the death of Fidel Castro.

But the 75-year-old Cuban exile is haunted by another obsession: Recovering nearly \$1.5 million that he says his former allies owe him for his purchase of planes, boats, a helicopter and explosives.

Llama, who once owned an air-conditioning business, claims he put up all that money for a secret "war council" that consisted of members of a powerful exile lobbying group, the Cuban American National Foundation. He further alleges they reneged on their spoken promise to share the cost of paramilitary activities against the Cuban government and its communist leader.

Llama filed a complaint with Miami police in the hope of sparking a criminal investigation. Recently, police said they're not going to open a probe, noting that Llama should pursue a lawsuit if he wants to resolve his financial dispute. That could pose a serious challenge because he doesn't have a written contract agreement with his former colleagues.

Llama, who went through a bankruptcy, expresses contempt for some of the men he once embraced as brothers in the never-ending fight against Castro and his communist government.

"They're all thieves," he told The Miami Herald.

For their part, they think Llama has lost his mind, denying his allegations.

'As far as I know, all of Mr. Llamas' allegations are false,' said Francisco "Pepe" Hernández, president of the Cuban American National Foundation. ``Let him present his case in a court of law. That is his right."

In 1961 Llama arrived in Miami, stayed a few hours, then traveled to Central America to join the Cuban exile army that the CIA was training for the Bay of Pigs assault after the Castro revolution. But on the day of the invasion, April 17, Llama said his boat ran out of gas and was delayed in arriving at the invasion site.

INVASION DEFEATED

By the time the boat arrived, the invasion forces had been defeated and his group was not allowed to land by the CIA. Had he landed, his mission was to distribute copies of the 1940 Cuban Constitution, he said. After his return to the United States, he and other family members left quickly for Puerto Rico, where they set up a successful business installing air conditioning in cars. The business expanded to the Dominican Republic, Panama, Ecuador and Spain.

Killing Castro remained a lifetime obsession.

It was in the early 1990s, when Llama was a board member of the Cuban American National Foundation, that the idea to adopt a violent strategy against Castro gained momentum, he said.

The setting was the exile group's annual convention in Naples in 1992. Its leaders recognized that traditional anti-Castro lobbying tactics in Washington were producing limited results, despite the eventual strengthening of the U.S. embargo against Cuba.

"It was decided that instead of using the money for lobbying, it should be used for making war against the Cuban regime to destroy it and kill Castro," Llama said.

Certain leading members of the foundation formed a war council, led by "Pepe" Hernández, Llama said. Their front was a state-registered company called Nautical Sports Inc., set up to buy equipment to carry out military-type plots against Castro.

Hernández, in an interview this past week, denied Llama's allegations, countering that the foundation focused on lobbying, fundraising and politics -- not terror plots.

"We have never participated or created any kind of covert operation for the overthrow of Castro," Hernández said. "That is something that has never been a mission or objective of the CANF."

But Llama disagreed. He said the then-leader of the foundation, Jorge Mas Canosa, was not directly involved in the foundation's clandestine group or its activities -- "but he was aware" of everything. "He told me, 'I want you to be in the first operation.'"

That first operation was the plot to assassinate Castro during a visit to the Venezuelan island of Margarita to attend a Latin American summit in 1997, he said.

To prepare, the war council's half-dozen members orally agreed to foot the bill for an arsenal together, Llama said. But he said things didn't work out that way. Instead, he said, he ended up putting up \$1.47 million to buy six vessels, 10 ultralight radio-controlled planes, a cargo helicopter, explosives and other weaponry -- including two .50 caliber rifles.

"When I saw that the others were not pitching in with money, I put in my money just to get things going," Llama said.

Llama said he also paid for a \$100,000 loan on a seventh boat that was set up by his colleague, Elpidio Núñez, at First Union National Bank, in the mid-1990s. Núñez says on his company's website that he sat on an advisory board at First Union, which acquired Wachovia in 2001.

Núñez, reached at his office by telephone, initially dismissed Llama as "a little touched in the head," but then said he wanted his lawyer to review the police report and provide a comment to The Miami Herald. He said the lawyer would call later, but no call was received as of Friday.

"At the time, I implicitly trusted Elpidio, and so I signed [for the loan] thinking it was necessary for the operation," Llama said.

Llama, who provided The Miami Herald with canceled checks and other records that show Nautical Sports' purchases of the equipment, organized the Margarita Island plot to kill Castro. He stayed behind while four others left on the boat.

But the 1997 mission failed before a Miami-registered boat carrying four men even reached its destination.

The Esperanza left Miami, stopped in the Dominican Republic to pick up some tracer bullets, and then traveled through the Mona Passage toward Margarita Island, he said.

The boat was intercepted by the Coast Guard in the passage off Puerto Rico. Four men were arrested. The Coast Guard found two .50-caliber rifles hidden on the boat. One of the men, Angel Alfonso, confessed to a plot to kill Castro. Llama, called by the FBI, surrendered to authorities in Puerto Rico.

'My son called me from there and said, 'Dad, what are you involved in?' and I told him, 'The cause, the same thing I've always been involved in.' "

Two other defendants also were charged. But as the trial began, one was separated from the case in Puerto Rico because he was already under arrest in Miami on unrelated drug-smuggling and money-laundering charges. Later the judge in Puerto Rico threw out charges against another defendant, leaving five to face the jury. The five defendants admitted they had planned to sneak into Margarita but only to stage peaceful protests and spirit away possible defectors from Castro's retinue.

FIVE ACQUITTED

The jury acquitted the five. In a stunning finale, two jurors later said the verdict was a "message" to the Cuban people, embraced the defendants and went off to celebrate with them at a popular Cuban restaurant.

Llama sobbed openly and vowed that the verdict would invigorate ``our efforts to continue to get freedom for our country."

"Not even the United States can control the minds and spirits of the people who want to fight for their country," Llama said at the time. ``This is not the end. This is just the beginning again."

Llama claims that was his last paramilitary operation against Castro.

Since then, he said, he has gone through a bankruptcy in Miami federal court. And he has written letters to Núñez and other former foundation colleagues to get the titles to the boats and planes he purchased a decade ago.

His final mission: ``Get rid of the lien on my house."

