

Couple strikes plea deal in Castro 'spy' case

A couple who worked at Florida International University pleaded guilty to reduced charges in a Cuban government 'spy' case.

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Almost one year after his arrest jolted Miami, former Florida International University professor Carlos Alvarez pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiring to be an unregistered agent who informed on the Cuban exile community for the communist government of Fidel Castro.

His wife, Elsa, an FIU counselor on leave, also pleaded guilty in federal court in Miami to being aware of his illegal activity, harboring him and failing to disclose it to authorities.

The Alvarezes averted a difficult jury trial next month on the more serious, previous charge of being Cuban agents who did not register with the U.S. government, an offense that carries up to 10 years in prison.

The plea deals were struck after a judge decided to allow a major piece of incriminating evidence at trial -- Carlos Alvarez's "confession" last year to the FBI of his collaboration with Cuban intelligence agents, including use of a home computer, encrypted disks and travel to the island.

"The entire case against Dr. Alvarez came from his own mouth," defense lawyer Steven Chaykin said outside the courthouse. He argued that his client told FBI agents "everything he did" after they dangled a "promise" to leave him alone if he told the truth.

Both Chaykin and Elsa Alvarez's lawyer, Jane Moscovitz, stressed to reporters that their clients "never sought to do any harm to anyone in this community." Chaykin said his client was simply trying to work toward lifting the U.S. embargo against Cuba through exchange programs -- an "idealism" infused with "naiveté" that "ensnared" him in the Cuban intelligence service.

Prosecutors condemned the Alvarezes' felony activities with Cuba's hostile regime.

"Today's guilty pleas serve as a stark reminder that there are among us some who, while enjoying the freedom and liberty our great nation offers, continue to serve the interests of another master," U.S. Attorney R. Alexander Acosta said.

The plea agreements, approved by U.S. District Judge K. Michael Moore, mean that Carlos Alvarez faces up to five years in prison and his wife, Elsa, up to three years at their sentencing, which is set for Feb. 27. Carlos, who has been held at the Miami Federal Detention Center since his arrest in January, smiled and blew kisses to a half-dozen supporters in the courtroom. His wife, who was released on a \$400,000 bond by the judge in June, remained stoic.

Alvarez, 61, was a longtime FIU psychology professor who formally resigned on Nov. 22, according to a school spokeswoman. His wife, Elsa, 56, was placed on a leave of absence without pay on Nov. 3.

The couple, who have five children, had been on paid administrative leave.

The FBI began targeting the couples' activities in 2001, when the agency installed a hidden microphone in the bedroom of their Miami-Dade home.

In the summer of 2005, two FBI agents picked up Carlos Alvarez at a local Publix and took him to a hotel, where he detailed his "conspiracy" with Cuban agents.

On Tuesday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Matthew Axelrod, aided by prosecutor Brian Frazier, depicted the Alvarezes in distinctly different roles.

Axelrod said Carlos Alvarez's involvement with the Cuba intelligence service began in 1977, noting he gathered information in Miami ``on prominent people, community attitudes, political developments and current events of interest to the Cuban government."

Among the exiles under surveillance: FIU president Modesto "Mitch" Maidique. He declined to comment.

Axelrod revealed a web of technology, secrets and cover-ups that would have been presented at trial.

"Alvarez received these instructions through personal meetings, messages written on water-soluble paper, coded pager messages and encrypted electronic communications," he told the judge. ``The electronic communications involved shortwave radio messages from the Cuban intelligence service, which Alvarez decrypted using a computer disk."

Alvarez then gathered the requested information and compiled written reports, which he encrypted using another computer disk. Alvarez signed these reports with his code name, ``David."

"Alvarez mailed these reports to various post office boxes in New York," then destroyed the evidence, Axelrod said.

Communication between Alvarez and his co-conspirators "ceased" when the U.S. attorney's office in Miami charged 10 suspects with espionage in the so-called Wasp spy case in 1998.

The prosecutor said Elsa Alvarez became aware of her husband's "conspiracy" in 1982. He said her role "helped conceal the true nature of his activities" -- until July 2005, when she spoke to the FBI.

Elsa Alvarez's lawyer, Moscowitz, said her client ``was very concerned for Carlos."