

Cuba frees man linked to Posada

A man with alleged ties to suspected bomber Luis Posada Carriles, under investigation in New Jersey, was released from a Cuban prison.

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Cuba recently released from prison a Guatemalan man with alleged connections to Cuban exile militant Luis Posada Carriles, who is being investigated by a federal grand jury in New Jersey on his alleged role in bombings on the communist island in the 1990s.

Jazid Ivan Fernandez Mendoza, 36, was released from a Cuban prison Dec. 12 and returned to Guatemala eight days later, according to Guatemala's ministry of the exterior.

A Cuban government official in Guatemala said in a telephone interview Monday that Fernandez, a Guatemalan citizen, had been released more than a year before his sentence was up.

EARLY RELEASE

"He was freed before finishing his term for good conduct even though he was accused of terrorism," said Rolando Barroso, first secretary to the Cuban ambassador in Guatemala. "It would be interesting to ask the American authorities, now that this person is free, if they are going to interview him."

FBI spokeswoman Judy Orihuela declined to comment on whether the agency had interviewed Fernandez.

Cuba accused Fernandez, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 1998, of helping prepare plastic explosives that were smuggled into Cuba by his wife, according to the charges against him outlined in a Miami Herald article in 1998.

A Cuban government report in 1998 said Fernandez, his wife and another Guatemalan arrested in March of that year identified Posada and two other people "as leaders and financiers of their plot to smuggle explosives into Cuba."

A data processor in Guatemala City, Fernandez said he had opposed the trip to Cuba. He was detained three weeks after his wife, Maria Elena Gonzalez Meza, when he traveled to Cuba to try to locate her.

Fernandez's brother, Hugo Fernandez, told The Miami Herald that his brother fears for his safety.

"He is out of the capital because he is afraid that something can happen to him, that someone will come after him," Hugo Fernandez said in a telephone interview Monday.

"He told me that he didn't want any more problems with anything, that he wants to forget about all of this and go back to his life and his family."

CUBA'S STANCE

Fernandez was among five Central Americans detained in Cuba in the late 1990s who the Cuban government believes were recruited and funded by Posada to set off bombs to hurt the island's tourism industry.

Posada, 78, sneaked into the United States in March 2005 and was detained about two months later by U.S. authorities. He has been held since then in an immigration detention center in El Paso, Texas.

A grand jury in Newark, N.J., is investigating Posada's role in the bombings that resulted in the death of an Italian national.

Meanwhile, Posada's lawyer, Eduardo Soto, is fighting for Posada's release. He said it isn't clear whether Fernandez can have an impact on the Posada case in New Jersey.

"I quite frankly don't know what, if anything, he would be able to offer," Soto said. "If, in fact, there is any communication or statement, we'd look at it and see what we're facing."

Jose Pertierra, a Cuban-American lawyer representing the Venezuelan government in the Posada case, said U.S. authorities should try to interview Fernandez.

'A MATERIAL WITNESS'

"He is certainly a material witness," Pertierra said. "If I was the prosecutor in New Jersey, I would certainly want to call him to testify before the grand jury. . . . He's very important."