

Leftist protesters accuse Posada supporters of assault

Members of a leftist youth organization filed a complaint against a group of Cuban exiles, claiming they were assaulted.

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Two members of the Bolivarian Youth group, saying they were spit on, slapped and chased as they peacefully protested in Little Havana last week, filed a police report Tuesday against a group of Cuban exiles.

"They attacked us without any provocation," Bolivarian Youth member Michael Martinez, 24, said as he filed charges at the Miami Police Department. "We didn't respond in any way to the violence. We just ran from them."

Martinez, a local graphic artist, and three others staged a counter-protest Friday across the street from a rally attended by about 100 Cuban exiles supporting anti-Castro militant Luis Posada Carriles, who is being held on immigration violations at a Texas federal detention center. The CIA-trained Posada, who has been implicated in several bombings at tourist sites in Cuba in the 1990s, is considered a hero by some Cuban exiles.

During Friday's rally at the Bay of Pigs Memorial at Southwest Eighth Street and 13th Avenue, a group of pro-Posada protesters charged the Bolivarian youth members, ripping a large poster from their hands that said, "Terrorists to Jail."

Miguel Saavedra, the leader of the pro-Posada group Vigilia Mambisa, threw a megaphone at Martinez as he and other Posada supporters chased the Bolivarian members to their car, according to video by TV news stations.

Another Posada supporter kicked the car, denting the left side, said Bolivarian member Sonja Swanson, 20, a Florida International University student.

"If Miami is part of the United States and the Constitution applies here, the government needs to take action against these thugs," said Jack Lieberman of South Florida Peace and Justice, which is helping the Bolivarian Youth group file charges. "If these people get away with this, it is a green light for other attacks in this community. Incidents like this have a chilling effect on civil liberties."

Bolivarian Youth is named after 19th century independence hero Simón Bolívar. The group is a leftist, anti-capitalist organization that supports the "Bolivarian" revolution of controversial Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. His supporters started Bolivarian groups in Venezuela and abroad, including Miami, New York and other major cities in the United States.

Saavedra blamed the Bolivarian Youth members.

"They provoked the Cuban people in exile," he said. "We have respected freedom of expression, and we continue to respect freedom of expression, but in this incident we were provoked."

Martinez dismissed Saavedra's version of events.

"How can you be captured on video, rallying a mob of people to assault a group of university students that are demonstrating . . . and then say that you are a victim?" Martinez asked. ``You've got to be kidding me."

The Bolivarian Youth members also criticized Miami police for not launching an investigation.

"They were violently assaulted, and there was no police action taken against the hooligans who attacked them," Lieberman said. ``Everyone saw what happened on TV, so how could nothing have been done?"

Lt. Bill Schwartz, a police spokesman, defended the department.

"It would have been wise for the [Bolivarian Youth] to have gotten a permit, so that we would have been alerted that it could become an explosive situation and so monitored it," Schwartz said. ``When we heard there was a disturbance, we sent officers to the protest site, but by then the parties that felt they had been wronged were gone, and there was nothing we could do in terms of making a report."